"Barry of Ours"

H. F. MACAULAY

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A Modern Romance

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BY

H. F. MACAULAY

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Find me the love that will bear the blame as well as the punishment.

—NEITSCHE.

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
	PROLOGUE (PENNED IN DESPERATE MOOD)	1
	PART I.	
I.	THE LONG ARM OF COINCIDENCE	9
II.	A MARRIAGE IN HASTE	18
III.	A FLY IN THE HONEYMOON POT	34
IV.	"PLANS OF MICE AND MEN"	45
V.	GROPING IN THE DARK	58
VI.	DICK UNBURDENS HIMSELF	71
VII.	AN OLD PORTFOLIO	77
VIII.	THE SHADOW OF THE PAST	86
IX.	A CONFIDENTIAL TALK	90
X.	ANOTHER CHANCE MEETING	101
XI.	I PUT MY FOOT IN IT	112
XII.	EVE HELPS ME OUT	122
XIII.	I MAKE INQUIRIES AT CORNER STREET	126
XIV.	MICHAEL ARRIVES WITH THE DAWN	138
XV.	I AM OFFERED A JOB	145
XVI.	I BID FRIENDS FAREWELL	152

PART II.

XVII. THREE YEARS AFTER 163
XVIII. I RETURN TO BLIGHTY . . . 174
XIX. MICHAEL 185
XX. CONCERNING GREENFIELDS . . . 193
XXI. THE PORTRAIT 206
XXII. MATTY 216
XXIII. DICK'S *COUP D'ÉTAT* 223
XXIV. AN UNWELCOME GUEST . . . 230
XXV. MICHAEL AND THE LOST LADY . . 241
XXVI. A LETTER AND A TELEGRAM . . 251
XXVII. UNDER CROSS FIRE 259
XXVIII. I BREAK FAITH WITH ESMÉ . . 270
XXIX. THE MILLS OF GOD 281
XXX. I BREAK FAITH WITH BARRY . . 288

PART III.

XXXI. RUTH TO THE RESCUE . . . 297

EPILOGUE 309

"Barry of Ours."

PROLOGUE.

(PENNED IN DESPERATE MOOD.)

In the shadow of a deserted corner of the Club that has stood to me in lieu of home from early subaltern days, looking out upon the darkening sky of a November afternoon, I have stared vacantly at the rain for an hour past, like a man face to face with a death warrant.

Stunned by the cruel prospect before me—a prospect devoid alike of any chance of reprieve or loophole of escape—I take up my pen to collect my scattered senses and dispel the night-mare of to-morrow's axe.

So unexpected a blow at the hands of Fate leaves me scarcely able to recognise my own ego! Till now, notoriously envied as the most care-free and unencumbered of all the blessed bachelors of Clubland—a phlegmatic fellow of an unromantic

turn of mind and past middle-age—I find myself to-day, unwittingly, hopelessly, trebly involved in this wretched business of the Dundarrans—already beginning to intrigue Mayfair.

Bound to bring misery to us all, it straightway forces upon me a break with Barry! . . .

But that the grim reality stands facing me like sudden death, it would be inconceivable. And Fate has so willed it that, come what may, the blame of the whole hideous affair shall fall inexorably upon the devoted head of this—my friend. A man, strangely doomed to bear the burden of other folks' sins and misdeeds, and not content with carrying them, he has been wont to shoulder them as though a king's cloak had been bestowed on him: with a queer kind of pride, but—mark you—with never a word.

For Barry is that rare outcome of the Western Isles—a Silent Celt. Given the small trifles of every day he may, as like as not, be seized with a fit of frowns and fidgets. But come a Big Thing, the very thing that most men—men, too, of no mean courage—shrink from, and Barry will make the plunge. With the grim determination of your strong taciturn Saxon or your stately Sheikh? Good Lord, no! Nothing of the kind. With a quick shy glance, maybe, or the flicker of a smile on his lips—lips capable of a most eloquent silence

—*that*, the regiment will tell you, is "Barry of Ours."

. . . . . .

Having no flair for psychology, nor yet for romance, I can set no halo round the early stages by which his friendship came to play the part it has done in my life.

I cannot, for instance, call to mind the first sight I had of Barry—the boy—when he appeared on the scene as a new arrival in the house of which I was captain. Yet life, before he came to colour it, has always seemed—looking back—a mere outline of memory; a thing lacking light and shade, depth and height. It was through him, my junior by four years, that I came to discover these things in life. Before his advent I can recall existence merely as a flat field. Green and pleasant it is true, but tame and tedious withal.

As I follow the path of our friendship, from Birchester days till this hour, when I sit here—a grey-haired man of four-and-fifty—I marvel at its constant course. The link of school-days may account for much, the ties of regiment for more. Certainly the fight for Esmé's honour in our youth and for my liberty in later life bound us together as brothers in bondage—the one to a loveless marriage, the other to a miserable exile. Yet, when all has been taken into account, the essential

contrast betwixt us is perhaps chiefly responsible for the steel and magnet process by which we have been drawn together again and yet again. Indeed the Fates themselves, half a continent—to say nothing of two women and a boy—have been powerless to divide us until this hour, when Greenfields and the Dundarrans between them, are like to wreck more than this—our friendship of a lifetime.

. . . . . .

As boy and man, I was always reckoned a steady-going chap, or if you prefer the term, an eminently respectable member—alike of school and society: too content, it has been said, to remain under the thumb of an aristocratic elder brother—early encumbered by a title and with an estate—as well as a reputation to keep up.

To be honest, the mischief of it all lies in the fact that I have been only too well endowed with the instinctive caution of a selfish nature, ever averse to the taking of risks.

Barry, on the contrary, by reason of his Irish blood, is a rebel in the grain. With a natural contempt for the halting uses of the law, he yet contrives to fulfil its dictates by virtue of the spirit with which he serves his fellows. As I set this down, I can hear him break in with his wonted word "Rot!"—and his laugh! His incomparable laugh. Sitting here I am haunted by

the sound of it; haunted, too, by the scene of that fatal encounter in the beechwood avenue to-day, an encounter that has robbed me of a double friendship. Good God! It is damnable!

. . . . . .

With a wrench I shake myself free of this dead weight of present misery, and deliberately concentrate my thoughts upon the past: a past, already glorified by its tragic setting of to-day—like the jewel in a memorial ring.

As I look backward, seeking, among the countless rays of remembrance, for some guiding star by which to find my way through the maze of memory, I am led straightway to the day which gave me my first glimpse of Phillida; that day in Armistice week—but five years ago—when Barry made her his wife.

PART I.

"In tragic life—God wot
No villain need be . . . passions spin the plot.
We are betrayed by what is false within."

—MEREDITH.

CHAPTER I.

THE LONG ARM OF COINCIDENCE.

I was sauntering to Baxter's and Bond Street that morning to secure some mufti: quite an event after a four years' fast from such indulgences.

Noting a small crowd gathering about St George's, I crossed the road to add another pair of eyes to those already prepared to nail themselves to the passing show; a poor one, it would seem, judging by the absence of the red carpet and the presence of but one solitary car in attendance. I planted myself, I remember, behind a decent-looking workman and his wife, imbued alike with a desire to stare, but badly hampered by a refractory child. These, together with a score of first-comers, had the advantage of me in a better view of the church door. I was indebted to them and other bystanders for a first impression of the bride and bridegroom.

"My! Ain't she a daisy! Look at 'er 'eather

bookay! Not 'arf a lidy for all that she's only in grey!"

"'*E* don't look much . . . shorter than 'er by 'alf an 'ead . . . Not much of a match, I call *that!*"

Here two girls elbowed their way past me—with them it was, "I say, isn't she a picture! Knows how to dress, what!"

"*Rather!* Look at that little cape—something quite new! I always say one learns so much from a wedding . . ."

"Why, they haven't got a bridesmaid or even a best man—I do call that shabby, now the war's over."

Here the small boy made an attempt to push past the barrier of human bodies, and got his toes trodden on in the process. A hideous howl followed that set everyone's teeth on edge.

"Drat the boy!" came from one of the crowd, and from his father, "Stop that 'ollerin', 'Orace—the 'appy pair don't want none o' your noise." With his mother it was, "Now then." She moved aside to shake the child with greater ease, and I got my chance.

It gave me a momentary vision of a girl, tall and slender, fair of face and proud of mien. It also gave me a partial glimpse of the groom at her side.

Was it the bride's profile, a perfect outline,

clear-cut as a cameo's, or something familiar in the man's gesture—a slight stoop—that impelled me to await a nearer view? Or was it merely idle curiosity, the foible that has so often earned for me the contempt of Eve? In vain I justify myself by defending the gregarious habit or by pleading a feminine taste for fine feathers.

"Nonsense!" cries this most captious and queenly of critics. "It's your own fine feathers that you are out to display. I know you!" Thus we quarrel, have ever quarrelled. But how, in God's name, shall I ever again . . .

This, however, is forbidden ground, and I must return to the bride and bridegroom.

They were standing by the church door, heedless of the bleak wind and drizzling rain, and with no eyes for the gleam of light faintly lambent in a leaden sky.

As no retinue was forthcoming, the group of onlookers melted away. The show, such as it was, had clearly come to an end, and I might have passed on my way, like the vanishing crowd, but for the unknown motive which prompted me to pause, even as the bride and bridegroom paused. They looked—seen from a distance—a little forlorn, I thought, as though disappointed of someone or something.

Meantime the workman and his family, like myself, had remained waiting in our original

position at a respectful distance from the church steps. The boy had subdued his howl to a whimper, and was wiping his eyes on the back of his mother's hand when he saw a sudden chance of freedom and the open street—his father intent on a refractory pipe, his mother still lost in contemplation of the bride's bouquet.

At the self-same moment the car with the wedding favour made a move. There was a cry and an oath, and I found myself dragging a muddy bundle—all arms and legs—from the bonnet of the bridal car. The cursing driver, relieved by the child's roar, resumed his seat with the comment, "Anyway 'is 'ead's not 'urt nor 'is lungs neither."

It was not till I turned to restore the bellowing boy to his parents that I found myself face to face with Barry—Barry, the bridegroom, who took the boy from me as casually as though we had parted from each other ten minutes instead of ten long years ago!

"He's all right," was his remark as he passed his hands professionally over the still howling boy, while his mother paused in her treatment of cuffs and kisses to wave off the bride's sympathy.

"No, my dear, don't you tech 'im—not in them clothes and yer gloves. . . 'Ere, 'Orace, *stop* it now! See them lovely flowers. . . . I'll take the 'eather, lidy. . . . 'E'll only spile it. . . .

Never you fear, I'll give 'im a bit to lose, leastways to pl'y 'ide-and-seek with—that'll bring yer the best luck—the luck that larsts."

"Well, he can't spoil *that*, and he had better not lose it. . . ." This from the bridegroom, producing a half-crown, "But if you try that game on again, you'll not come off so easily, you young rascal."

The note of dismissal in Barry's voice had the desired effect. With hurried thanks and the words, "Bless your 'eart, doctor, I thought you was a lord," the woman moved off, the husband submissively and the boy rebelliously, following in her wake.

This queer little mishap was to haunt me strangely nearly a year after, when Barry and I stood waiting together on the eve of Michael's advent. At the time I never gave it a thought, my mind being in a whirl of wonderment.

I had seen Esmé's tragic death in the papers, not two years ago, from heart failure in an air raid—enchanting Esmé Dundarran! 'La Belle Dame sans merci.'

I had written a line to Barry at the time. I knew too much of the first ten years of his married life, and too little about it afterwards, to write more. He had thanked me on a post-card from Salonika, where he was fighting wounds and disease in a fever hospital. A second marriage

was the very last thing I had expected of him: still less that he would have left me in ignorance of the fact—I, who had, twenty years ago, stood as best man on the occasion of his first wedding and now found myself by accident an uninvited onlooker at his second. I felt like vanishing in the trail of Horace & Co., when his hand was on my shoulder, and he was saying—

"So you got my letter all right. . . . Like you, old chap, to be fashionably late and yet in the nick of time!"

"*I* got no letter—this is utterly accidental, my dear fellow."

"Good Lord!" he said, looking up at me, and ten years were swept away by a glance from his eye.

Then, introducing me to his bride, he explained—

"We only decided on Sunday to pull it off to-day—my leave was an unexpected bit of luck. . . . We . . ."

"I say, old chap, do you know it's raining?" I interrupted, turning to the bride.

It annoyed me to see her in her delicate furs, exposed to a November drizzle. She was wearing a velvet cape affair trimmed with chinchilla. ("A topping turn-out," as Ruth would have styled it.) Not exactly in the mode of the moment, but altogether befitting the wearer. The bystander

who had used the word 'picture' rightly phrased the effect she produced.

But how in the name of wonder, thought I, had Barry picked up this rather alarming piece of perfection. And what use could he have for her? He—Barry—as poor as a church mouse, and as inarticulate as an anchorite.

"Is it any good waiting for Dick?"

Heard for the first time, her voice came as a delightful revelation. Set in a low key, its clear measured tones have many a time since caught my ear through the high staccato of a dozen fashionable female voices in a London crush.

As she put the question to Barry, there was a note of subdued radiance about her—a radiance that should have disposed, I thought, of the altruistic scruples of any bridegroom, be the belated guest who he may.

Then I suddenly remembered who 'Dick' stood for—Esmé's boy and my godson! How the deuce, thought I, had he solved the problem of the two children?

What I said was, "I wouldn't wait for the King if he had failed to turn up by now."

"Yes, you would," said Barry, "if you were waiting for him to sign the register. But, by Jove! you'll do just as well as the King and better than Dick. Come along, the parson must be cursing us by now."

"But, my dear fellow, that awful child has left a street full of mud on my hands. I must have a wash before I can show myself in church."

"Rot! Who cares whether you are a little muddy or not? You're the F.F. still, I see, in spite of the war."

I had been dubbed F.F. (Fastidious Fop) by a waggish senior subaltern to cap Kipling's 'flannelled fools' when I first joined up, and the initials had stuck.

"Look here, my dear chap"—Barry was holding on to my elbow while he explained the situation, —"as luck would have it, I've been waiting in that confounded vestry an hour or more for Phillida . . . while she's been sitting in her pew expecting Dick and me to turn up every moment. She and I had just collided at the church door, both in search of Dick, when *you*—why, you've surpassed yourself by appearing like the god in the car."

"Come on, then," I cried, "or the parson will be giving us the slip next."

Silently I cursed the Fates, for here was Barry challenging them again by meeting his bride on the marriage day, *outside* the church, *before* the knot was tied. Just the sort of thing he would do, and defy Destiny—with a big D—if called to account for his temerity.

I followed them into the church, and when all

was over—when the signatures had been made, necessary to the legality of this hasty wedding —I drew the bride's attention to the gleam of light as we stepped into the street, only to get the answer—

"Oh, ours is not the wedding day that needs any sunshine to gild it. It belongs to the war and to the regiment."

Said gracefully, though gravely, I took it as a speech fitting to the occasion. Made, too, with due consideration to the Colonel of the 90th Rifles, at that moment clad in khaki (a good deal the worse for war wear), and very conscious of lacking the garment proper to a wedding guest.

Barry, however, broke in with, "Don't flatter yourself, my dear fellow, that that remark was made for *your* benefit."

And I as quickly retorted, "If not the happy man who prompted such a charming reply, I had the honour of receiving it anyway." I had yet to learn that Phillida's sincerities precluded her from offering even to a stranger the flowers and incense of an empty compliment.

Cars being that day at a premium, Barry would have me take the seat by the driver.

"We shall find Dick and the wedding breakfast waiting for us at Bellamy's," said he.

We found the wedding breakfast right enough, but no Dick. . . .

CHAPTER II.

A MARRIAGE IN HASTE.

Not only was there no sign of Dick, but no substitute for him in the shape of a message—not a note, 'phone, or wire forthcoming to explain his non-appearance.

Exhaustive inquiries were set on foot to ascertain whether Dick, or news of him, might be secreted in the recesses of the office—that mysterious oracle daily beset by the riddles of the universe since office gods were begotten.

On this occasion, when the final inquiry had again drawn a blank, bride and bridegroom were distinctly nonplussed.

"Don't understand it," was Barry's curt comment in the irritable undertone I knew so well when things went wrong.

"I'm afraid I do," was the girl's response—also made under her breath. "He's angry."

"Angry?" snapped Barry. "Nonsense! Why

should he be angry? It was his own idea to act as best man."

We were being ushered by the immaculate Henry into the smaller of the two reception rooms set apart for such affairs as wedding breakfasts.

The table was sumptuously arrayed—the usual bridal cake, viands and vanities proper to the occasion, hot-house flowers, too, of the choicest. There had been no sparing of expense, I could see, either in the display of comestibles or in the table decorations. Yet the guestless character of this wedding feast gave a strangely sombre aspect to the affair. There was something spectral about the cold white pyramid standing there in the centre, reflected in half a dozen mirrors, and the flowers seemed garishly set to mock the emptiness and the silence of the room.

I felt a superfluous fool, and a sense of nightmare possessed me.

Perhaps it was the inevitable comparison I found myself making between Barry's first and second wedding. Not only between the two brides! Ye gods! a contrast indeed! But between the two scenes! On the one hand, an Indian bungalow at Komankotal, and on the other—Bellamy's! Then the scorching sun of India in June—now the wintry sky of London in November. Yet each alike in producing that dread sense of a skeleton at the feast.

In this instance the skeleton seemed likely to absent himself.

Should I propose to go out in search of him—as I had gone in search of Frank twenty years ago? Or should I stay to drink the bride's health, and dispel, if I could, the nervous frown on Barry's face that we all knew so well, when his patients suddenly took the wrong turn?

The wags of the regiment had dubbed him F.F. (Frowns and Fidgets) in complement to my own F.F. As 'the double F.F.'s' we had been coupled together; also as the Giant and the Dwarf, as David and Jonathan, the Grump and the Grig! A score of harmless jokes flourished at our expense in that school of young bloods—the 90th Rifles—though not in any way to the detriment of our friendship.

Were the same memories passing through Barry's mind, I wondered?

The memory of it all paralysed my thoughts, so that without making any attempt to untie this Gordian knot of the moment, I walked to the window, leaving the newly married pair to discuss the situation.

"We can't begin without him, can we?"

The bride was clearly raising her voice to include me in the debate—so I turned from my study of the weather to produce, if possible, a brilliant idea.

But Barry was before me.

"Begin!" he exclaimed. "Of course, we can begin! I don't suppose after this he'll dare to show himself here!" Then, with one of his hasty jerks and a desperate frown, "There can't have been an accident, what?"

"Very unlikely." The girl was conspicuously calm. Not so much as the flicker of an eyelid about *her!*

Later, I came to understand the full significance of that unruffled demeanour, what it concealed, as well as what it revealed. At the moment I could only recall Esmé's conduct on the like occasion; the half-dozen tragedies she had pictured in as many minutes; finally, the hysterical outburst in which she had blamed everyone and everything.

I roused myself from this reverie of the past, and offered my services (as I had done twenty years before) in discovering the defaulting guest.

I felt keenly now for Barry, as I had felt for him then, though for very opposite reasons. On the present occasion I was inclined to be critical of this girl's cool indifference, for so I read her manner. One might almost have thought it stupid indifference, but for a glance at her face, as she said decidedly—

"Oh no, we can't lose our one wedding guest."

She was removing her gloves and the severe

little cape with the precision of a business woman. Barry and I had no chance to do anything but hover helplessly, so quick and unerring were her movements.

The situation was clearly beginning to work upon Barry's nerves, if not his temper.

He looked desperately at his bride. "What about my going across to Dick's office myself? As you say, something has upset him."

Some emotion—at last—of pride rather than embarrassment flooded the girl's face with colour. But her answer came again, clear and collected, "Yes, that *would* be best, I think."

"I can't forgive the boy this," Barry muttered between his teeth.

"Oh, Barry! How can you be so silly! Your own boy—and the person who brought us together, too!"

Her remark was clearly the right one to have made in the circumstances, judging from the way in which the bridegroom's face cleared, and oddly enough it answered a question I had been asking myself, pretty persistently, since the service was over. It also, incidentally, left me with the feeling that it must be rather charming to be called 'silly' on one's wedding day by a bride twenty years younger than oneself!

Meanwhile the bridegroom, bent on action, determined to waste no time, flew off with his

lightning speed of movement, only pausing to say, "Phillida, of course, knows you already. And when I tell you she's the daughter of Fane of ours—Philip Fane—you'll understand her snubbing you just now!" Our eyes met for the tenth of a second and he was gone.

He might have prepared me for the shock before he left me alone with his bride—wondering what to say, and still more what *not* to say! Mercifully she belonged to another generation! But how much of the past was dead and buried, and how much of it had been revealed to her?

For this girl, the heiress of Greenfields, was the child who, far away in her English home, had played so unconscious yet so fateful a part in the drama which was enacted that summer at Komankotal.

The heiress of Greenfields!

That meant she was the granddaughter of Lady Fane, the rich and handsome Quakeress who had originally inherited that vast estate and had reigned supreme both before and after her marriage as Lady Bountiful of the Brackenbury district for half a century.

I looked at the bride with enlightened eyes.

She broke in upon my reflections by saying, "You must have known my father?"

"Yes, indeed, I have stayed at Greenfields

many a time as a graceless schoolboy in Birchester days!"

I had just been thinking that the finely chiselled features before me bore a certain resemblance to the stern countenance of Lady Fane, when the girl's face suddenly melted to the softness of a flower. "How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Barry never told me *that*."

"I loved the General—Sir John—from childhood," I went on. "Besides, to all us fellows in the 90th, he was the Bayard of the regiment. . . . But, like many others, I was always a little frightened of your grandmother."

"Most people were, I know. To me they were not merely grandparents. They were everything, for I lost both my father and mother when I was five."

(I thought of Philip and all I knew of *that* tragedy.)

"Were you with the regiment at Spion Kop, when my father fell?"

"I was, and had the luck to witness his gallant action there; you know the story, of course?"

"Yes—Major Gordon——" Her colour rose and flooded her face as it had done when Barry proposed to leave her in search of Dick. (She was beautiful when she blushed.) "Major Gordon described it to grandfather and me . . ."

Major Gordon! Frank! What did she know

of him, and why that colour? Did she know all, or nothing? Did she even realise that he was Esmé's cousin?

"You must have known him too," she said. There was the same reverence with which she had spoken of her father, and no mere deference to soldiership in the tone with which she said, "Were you with him at Ypres—when *he* fell?"

At that moment the door burst open, and a tall fair youth strode into the room.

Dick!

I was unprepared for the startling likeness. He was a Dundarran all over. The image of his mother, and of that scoundrel Frank, too, worse luck! Apollo had been *his* nickname in the regiment, and, like him, young Dick had all the good looks of a Greek athlete. Following him came, much muffled, a small girl, who flung herself upon the bride in a sobbing condition—the boy having already hugged her like a bear.

Clearly these children had accepted her as a sister rather than a mother, as well they might. She looked little more than a child herself as she responded to their embraces and smiled at their delight over her wedding clothes.

"Where's Fah? Is he very shirty at my not turning up at St George's?"

I could have kicked the youth for his cool impertinence.

He clearly had not changed much in essentials during the ten years that had elapsed since I saw him last. He was then a holy terror, senselessly spoiled by Esmé.

The bride treated his question—as she did everything—with calm composure. "He has gone to look for you," she answered. "We couldn't imagine what had happened. You promised, you know!"

"I thought you'd *guess* it was Matty who stopped me."

At these words the said Matty, who had been punctuating everything with sobs, now uttered a yelp of despair. An ugly child she was—most unattractive in her display of feeling. I knew her age could not be less than thirteen; but she looked barely eleven, undersized and hunched, with red hair and an ungainly mouth. Nothing about *her* to recall her mother—save in the want of self-control. For Esmé, even in her wildest moods of grief and joy, was a poem that left one without power to consider facts. She was either the embodiment of beauty in distress, or as radiant as a morning in June, but—always entrancing, altogether irresistible!

Not so Matty! Her brother showed some sense, I thought, by telling her to 'dry up' and not be a fool. But she entirely ignored his advice.

Clinging to the bride, she burst into a torrent of words: "It was all my fault—not Dick's—I wrote and told him I could not *bear* to be left out on the wedding day. So he came and fetched me. Miss Venables was very stuffy at first—wanted permission from Fah. It was frightful! And it all took such a beastly time that we missed the train . . . and now he will have to cart me back very soon. Oh, darling Phee, do melt like Miss Venables. She's taken no end of a fancy to Dick; you can't think——"

"Don't talk rot, Matty. Still . . . I'll own she was very decent to me, that woman." The conceited young ass was straightening his tie complacently before one of the many mirrors, when he suddenly wheeled round with the words, "But—hang it all, where's Fah?"

By an odd chance Barry himself at that moment darkened the doorway; breathless, bewildered, and taken aback at the sight of the girl.

Dick's look again made me feel vicious.

He had the deprecating air of one who would apologise for too complete a victory over authority. I felt he had acted towards his father like a cub that wanted kicking. He had the grace to redden when Barry's eye fell on him with a look expressing anger, relief, and a desire to let off steam. Otherwise Dick remained as complacent as before.

But when, on looking round for the first time,

he espied me in the window-seat, he was completely taken aback.

Observing this, the bride interposed with the judicial air of one dismissing an unpleasant incident.

"It's all right, Barry, now it's explained. Let's start at once. I'm ravenously hungry, and Colonel Carmichael has been a most long-suffering guest. You owe him an apology, too, Dick. He volunteered to hunt you up, but I was sure that we should only lose him, without finding you."

Recriminations were never in Barry's line, and certainly not on such a day as this. He merely ignored the incident—at his bride's request—and left Dick severely alone.

The boy looked becomingly sheepish, suddenly alive to the fact that he had made a fool of himself. This softened my indignation, and when he glanced at me, clearly doubtful whether he might approach me or not, my heart melted. His look had the appeal of a chidden child. So like his mother! Here was my cue—at last.

Striding forward in my rôle of godfather I made a farcical appeal to Barry for permission to pronounce Dick shriven. Before I could finish my pantomime speech, Barry had me by the elbow, and, to the delight of the two children, we engaged in a round of ju-jitsu. This, too, before the champagne had been uncorked . . .!

The bride looked on, no longer coldly indifferent.

There was gratitude, as well as laughter, in her eyes as she said, "You *are* a godfather worth possessing." This time I recognised I was the recipient of something better than a snub. I could see I had made a good impression, if not as Barry's friend, at any rate as Dick's sponsor.

Meanwhile, through the course of our repast, that tiresome and aggressive child, Matty, spent her time snivelling round her father, kissing his hand and generally protruding her penitence upon the company, till Dick threatened that, if she sniffed again, he would leave her to find her own way back to school. This had the desired effect of banishing her into the background.

But as bad luck would have it, she shortly afterwards overheard her brother explaining to me how it was through *his* friendship with Phillida that the marriage had come about. This made her again rush to the front, to prove that it was really entirely due to *her* being a patient in the hospital where Phillida was nursing.

I then learnt from the bride herself that Matty's back had been damaged in the raid that had killed her mother from shock. It was then she first discovered the great fact that these two children—suddenly bereft of mother and home—belonged to the regiment.

"And to the regiment alone, till their father returned," she added. "For I found them even more bereft of relatives than I am!"

Here was a light! She had evidently mothered them for those two years with more than the mere official fund of affection and help, seeing them as often as her nursing duties would allow her, and taking them about with her on high days and holidays.

More I might have learnt, but Matty again interposed by asking Phillida how she and Barry were going to manage *without her* on their honeymoon?

"For they've always had one or other of us, and sometimes both, to look after them, whenever Fah has been in London," she explained to me. "So *what* they'll do without *us*, I don't know."

In despair I plied this talkative damsel, furiously, with all the good things I could lay hands on, even administering a small glass of champagne to keep out the cold.

Dick's dignity as a bank clerk of a week's standing gave way to a frankly schoolboy appetite for the good fare—despite his nineteen years and his masculine powers of captivating a schoolmistress.

Finally, we reached the stage when everybody started making speeches without finishing them.

It was a scramble to find Matty's hat and coat in time to bundle both sister and brother into a taxi at the hour necessary to satisfy school regulations.

"Do, dear Phee—
Write to Miss V—
To send Me
To the Rivieree"—

shouted this incorrigible child as we shut her into the car. Dick swore at her—all to no purpose,—while Barry chose to put the whole blame on me for administering to her that thimbleful of champagne.

I then made my adieux, but not before the 'happy pair'—finding that I also was bound for the Riviera—begged me to look them up at Vieuxport.

I left them, promising to think about it.

What I did think about as I left them at Bellamy's—due to start on the morrow for Calais—was the fact of Barry's madness in plunging headlong into such a marriage.

Not content with making that incongruous and hasty union with Esmé at four-and-twenty, which had acted like a thunderbolt on the regiment—ignorant to this day of the mystery behind it,—he must outdo himself by marrying this girl, Philip Fane's daughter and an heiress to boot.

Had he married an impecunious elderly widow

with several children, it would have been a comprehensive act of folly, from Barry. But to carry off a girl who would have been a most desirable party for half the young aristocrats in the country . . . !

And to add to the mystery: how the deuce did he do it? He, a plain man, penniless and retiring—accounted, it is true, one of the priceless possessions of the regiment, and certainly among the most notable M.D.'s in the Service to-day; but, outside his own department, wholly insignificant. Though, as he belongs, by the way, to a good old Irish family, he is in a position to satisfy any of your sticklers for birth and breeding.

Well, for better for worse, it was a *fait accompli!*

Those two would now be free, for the first time, to discover each other's ego. For I gathered from Matty's small-talk that, since their first meeting, Barry had been tied, hand and foot, as house surgeon in a Northumberland hospital. Phillida, equally bound to a war-time Committee, had been, moreover, in strict quarantine on account of a scarlet-fever outbreak at her temporary home in London.

So where, in all conscience, had they found any opportunity for love-making?

At all events I took comfort in the thought that Barry was free from official ties for the time being. Free to forget the past and the

future, to forget the great city rejoicing in the first merciful days of peace; to forget, for the nonce, two such important factors, in the future, as Dick and Matty.

After all, he and this girl were but one of many couples who had found each other in the tangled maze of men and women produced by the war. Having taken their courage in both hands, they—like so many before them—had agreed to make the Great Adventure together, at infinite risk and without any real security for happiness.

Should each have found in the other a true life-mate, then this honeymoon might well create for them that paradise in which Time is not.

Failing that, it should, at all events, prove a sanctuary where, for three blessed weeks, they would remain safe from invasion, where the voices from the troubled world outside would only faintly and fitfully disturb their peace—as well as their chance of coming to know something of each other.

Musing thus, I felt that—despite his madness, or perhaps because of it—Barry was almost to be envied.

CHAPTER III.

A FLY IN THE HONEYMOON POT.

BUT whether as paradise or sanctuary, the peace of their honeymoon was destined to be invaded within a week by a letter from Dick.

That it was of a disturbing nature and needed prompt attention was clear from the wire that reached me on my visit to Edward at Hyères. It ran: "Letter from Dick. Come earliest opportunity. B. and P. O'Neill. Vieuxport, Petit Cour."

The double initial amused me. It suggested a honeymoon indeed.

The wording of the appeal, too, was distinctly feminine. The act would certainly never have come from Barry unprompted. It was a 'beastly bore,' as Ruth would have phrased it, to break in upon their retreat. Edward groused too, I remember, in elder brotherly fashion, at missing his usual round of golf with someone whom he could both beat and abuse.

But I went.

They had taken rooms at the little seaside village of Vieuxport, and Edward relented sufficiently to motor me there, while he insured my prompt return by undertaking to pick me up again after a call on a friend at Monte Carlo.

They were in primitive quarters, but clean and comfortable. Phillida had, it seemed, the same temperamental dislike as Barry to the modern fashionable Riviera hotel. Neither craved the honour of rubbing shoulders with actors or aristocrats, profiteers or princes. They were not the least entertained at hearing of the political celebrities I had encountered when making a recent incursion on Cap Martin a week before.

Barry looked a different being from the distraught and irritable bridegroom I had seen on the steps of St George's a week ago. The bride wore the same air of placidity that had both intrigued and irritated me on the day of the wedding.

Now I fell under its sway.

There was something Victorian about it—a suggestion of primness that her Quaker ancestry might account for,—but it held the charm of one whose outlook is wholly feminine and essentially virginal, a type rarely encountered in these days.

It afforded a refreshing change, if nothing more, from the modern damsel.

After we had exchanged a few inanities, and I failed to amuse them over a comedy of mistaken identity that we had witnessed last week at the tables, Barry and I discussed after-war politics.

Then we came to business.

Dick was, of course, the bunker that bothered them. They had established him in suitable quarters with a friendly bank clerk and his wife —when scarlet fever had closed the Benhams establishment in Corner Street. This, I now learnt, had been Phillida's home during the war, Greenfields having been let by the Trustees until such time as the heiress should turn her thoughts to matrimony.

Benham, I found, had been the old General's faithful valet—now married to Phillida's one-time nurse. These two had elected to buy a house in Corner Street with their savings. Here within the doctor's area they had carried on a successful business during the war, taking in particular the private patients of two notable Harley Street specialists. It so happened that Matty O'Neill was their first patient, with Phillida —the lady of Greenfields Manor—in attendance as nurse.

It was typical of the war. A fine disregard of tradition and the feudal system. I could recall Mrs Benham's father as head gamekeeper in days gone by!

"Elizabeth had leave to smack me if I tore my frock, tree climbing," explained Phillida, "and now as 'Mrs Ben' she still scolds me if I go out in the rain without a hat on."

"She'll amuse you," said Barry to me a little grimly. He had always, like Eve, a latent contempt for my lively interest in all and sundry.

"If you can get the husband to talk, and the wife to be silent, you'll have performed a miracle," he went on. Barry seemed to take for granted that I should become acquainted with this couple, and, later on, I was to understand why.

At this moment, however, he merely gave me Dick's letter to read.

The trouble, according to Dick, sprang from the natural desire of the clerk's wife to procure a more profitable tenant. She considered the rooms were good enough for a married couple; in other words, she would like the profit of two instead of only one paying guest.

"She's a stingy PIG herself," Dick wrote, "and a woman would be a better match for her."

He went on to ask what he should do? Had his father and Phee any plans yet as to their return and place of abode? Finally, what were Barry's wishes? In other words, what allowance was his father prepared to make for Dick to meet the expenses of digs, his office pay being clearly insufficient to enable him to dress like a

gentleman. He piously regretted troubling his father at such a time, but he would admit (Dick felt sure) that the matter was an urgent one.

"She will be taking two Johnnies or a couple —with perhaps a baby—any day, and I shall have to clear out. . . ."

It was a long and rather unconvincing statement, I thought, conveying somehow that the boy's dislike to his surroundings was largely responsible for the urgency of the problem.

The question to me was, did he see Master Dick's hand in this ready-made bunker as I did?

Before I had time to consider even a comment on the letter, he broke in with, "What the deuce does the boy mean by writing to me like that—just now too? I shall let him know what I think of him."

"That," thought I, "is very doubtful," remembering his inability to assert himself in the old days when the boy was but nine.

Phillida took up Dick's defence.

"I can't see why you should blame the poor boy. It's not his fault if Mrs Pike wants to make more out of her rooms. It's really a very humble letter."

"Humble?" Barry snapped, looking distractedly for his pipe.

"Yes. He doesn't take for granted, which he might, that he would be coming to us when we

have got a house. It shows real consideration—most unusual for a boy of his age."

Here spoke the judgment of four-and-twenty on nineteen.

"We could offer," said Barry, suddenly radiant, "to meet Mrs Pike's extra terms till our return. That would settle the trouble, what?"

"Anyway, we must write at once and welcome him to join us—as soon as we get settled."

"Oh, is *that* your view?"

Barry had been feverishly slapping and turning out his pockets in search of the missing pipe, and was now staring round the room in a wild attempt to spot the necessary crutch to thought. He then made a bolt from the room to recover it elsewhere.

I felt like a fool. They seemed to be discussing this thing for the first time together, and my presence was patently an intrusion.

The girl, as if reading my thoughts, began apologetically, "Barry would not discuss this before. He wanted to leave the letter—to talk over when you came, so I don't yet really know his wishes."

I began to see my uses.

At that moment Barry arrived with the crutch, equipped for facing the situation. He bent down, in somewhat fatherly fashion, to kiss his bride. She was sitting on a stool before the French

wood fire, a picture to dispel away any man's ill-humour.

Barry began a little nervously, "Do you really want me to propose Dick should make his home with us, Phee? I never expected—no one could—that you should burden yourself with both of them like that. Matty's holidays will be on us before long."

"And why not?" Her words seemed to parry rather than settle the point at issue. She did not voice her thoughts, or convey any surprise at the introduction of Matty into the problem before them; and Barry apparently looked for no other answer than the child's kiss she proffered in response to his.

Her silences were clearly part of her charm, in his eyes—perhaps because they seemed to mirror the quiet spaces of a mind at peace with itself. As she never rushed into speech—you waited, instinctively, for her to reveal herself in that low voice that conveyed decision, and invited confidence. I decided that it was her voice that must have attracted Barry from the moment they met; even before he had been held by her glance—a glance from grey eyes, under drooping lids, that bespoke a lively intelligence and a power of quiet observation. A glance, in fact, that gave animation to a face otherwise lacking mobility; so firm with the curves of the beautiful

mouth ; so still the arched eyebrows, dark as her eyelashes ; so perfect the profile. In repose, a critic might have pronounced it hard, and the poise of the head haughty, but for the softening effect of beech-brown hair, which, unlike the rest of her, refused to be kept in order. Strands of russet gold that sprang in rebellious waves about her forehead suggested a latent energy capable of asserting itself, should occasion offer.

And Barry, watching her placidly turning down the edge of a fine seam, might well shrink from obtruding any tiresome thoughts of the future upon the happy meditations in which her mind seemed absorbed.

I, however, allowed myself to doubt whether, in this instance, his bride's placidity sprang from a settled mind or an abstracted mood as she sat there, leaving all conversation to us. It struck me, even then, that her silence sprang rather from the instinct which, when opposed or startled, leads certain natures to strengthen their reserves and await events.

But, apart from this baffling calm, I wondered were these children to her an inseparable part of Barry ? Before his advent she had clearly enjoyed a happy fellowship of youth with the two of them : Matty as her patient, Dick as a ready correspondent and eager guest whenever he got leave from the Officers' Training Camp.

It was no easy matter to decide upon, but as I looked at my friend's face I judged him still in the early stages of married felicity; though I questioned in my mind whether his glance did not suggest the devotion rather of the proud parent than of the rapturous lover. In any case, it was not fair that a spoilt youth like Dick should mar—as mar he certainly would—the serenity of their early married life.

Matty's holidays were another affair. In short, I saw it was up to me as Dick's godfather to find suitable digs for this boy, who would clearly be at a loose end when his day's work was done.

It was then I thought of Eve.

I was carrying in my pocket a recent letter from her, which had decided me to take a hurried trip to town to judge for myself of her mother's condition. Here was a home where Dick would be mothered. Eve could be trusted not to spoil him, while he would certainly relieve the monotony of her evenings after the long hours in the invalid's room.

"I believe I know the very place for him," I said, "and I could fix it up as soon as I get to town. I could vouch for his being happy there, at any rate till your return. He would be with friends of mine . . . the mother's an invalid . . . they keep a modest but comfortable home. He'd be well fed and made to keep early hours, what?"

Both Barry and Phillida jumped at this proposal. Indeed, they were quite touchingly grateful.

"I knew you'd come to the rescue, old chap," said Barry with that look of his that always dispelled any fog that ever filtered into our friendship.

They then opened out their own plans. They had heard of a house not far from the Military Hospital, to which Barry had been appointed. It would be some time, however, before the terms of purchase could be arranged, the owner being abroad.

Meantime they thought of rooms. Both barred the idea of a hotel.

"By Jove, we might do worse than Corner Street," said Barry, turning to Phillida. "The Bens must have got rid of their scarlet fever patients by now."

His wife greeted the suggestion—made apparently for the first time—with the calm acquiescence that was, I could see, Barry's constant wonder and delight. This atmosphere was certainly a new experience in his home life. If, however, he was mistaking deference to the male and a habitual reserve, for the natural docility of a clinging disposition, he might have an awkward awakening one day.

Be that as it might, I could feel assured that

in the present instance he was happy. So, having taken Dick's address and promised to relieve Mrs Pike of her paying guest as quickly as possible, I bade them adieu, and joined Edward at the little wayside café at Frevy, where we had made an assignation.

CHAPTER IV.

"PLANS OF MICE AND MEN."

BUT I was too late. Master Dick had made his own arrangements. On calling at Highborough Mansions I found he had left two days ago.

My surmise proved to be a correct one.

Dick was discontented; and this had led him to discover that the Pikes would find a married couple more profitable as paying guests. I further learnt that it was not only his own idea. He had actually found his own successor by recommending the rooms to one of the married clerks at the bank.

"And our new tenants are quite comfortable, I am glad to say," Mrs Pike hastened to add. "With Mr O'Neill . . . it was different. I don't blame *him*, a gentleman accustomed to everything of the best."

I thought of Esmé in the old days at the Italian summer-house.

Evidently Dick had impressed the owner of

101 Highborough Mansions with a sense of his importance as a young man accustomed to move 'in upper circles,' and I was inwardly amused to find that my appearance was only adding to that impression.

("It is just your tailor, Uncle Jim," says that pert child Ruth from time to time. "You bet he keeps a special cut for Honourables.")

To my surprise Mrs Pike gave me the Corner Street address.

I went there late in the afternoon of the next day, little thinking what part the house and its owners were to play in my own life . . . still less what 'the Bens' were to count for in the destiny of the O'Neills.

The door was opened to me by the master himself—'old Ben,' as he was known in the Fane family, a tall, powerful-looking man, loosely built, with a face like a brick. His gaze was a somewhat disconcerting one. He appeared to be taking mental notes of every feature in one's face.

This portentous stare—at once bland and penetrating—must have suggested alarming possibilities to any weak-minded or intriguing strangers who might have presented themselves in the old days at Greenfields. Later on, when I learnt the resources of this man (for to a knowledge of him I never pretended), I realised his value as

a family servant and confidential valet to the old General. If people wanted information they learnt to go for it to Eliza (Phillida's nurse, my lady's trusty maid), and they never failed to get a yard's length—full measure ; but not often were they treated to the particular yard they were in search of.

But if Eliza showed an aptitude for giving away general information, Ben gave an impression of possessing an unlimited faculty for absorbing it. His appreciation of the smallest crumb of news many people took as a personal compliment to their powers of presenting it.

There was certainly a definite charm in dropping anything into the willing ear of Benham. Insatiate for information, he seldom answered, never interrupted, and always respected the confidence he received, while he carefully abstained from any expression of opinion. By his rapt attention to the utterances of everyone, he had earned for himself, I found, a considerable reputation as a ' knowing chap.' No policeman, taking down evidence after an accident, ever achieved a more concentrated and cautious attention than Benham's face assumed on the most trivial fact being imparted to him. He took no risks. Even to his wife I was told he seldom ventured anything more hazardous than " To be sure." When deeply moved he had been heard to say, " Who

would have thought it?" But, as a rule, the more important the announcement made to him, the more he excelled in the wisdom and understanding that rises superior to speech.

On this occasion he noiselessly shut the door behind me. Then, with one eye firmly screwed on to me and the other directed towards a glass door on the right, he slowly uttered—in a sepulchral voice—the one word, "Liza."

As if impelled by a gale of wind the owner of the name literally 'blew in,' and I beheld the Bess of the Greenfields nursery, the Eliza of my lady's chamber, and the Mrs Elizabeth Benham of Corner Street!

Quite fifteen years the man's junior I judged her. Our old Scotch expression, "A sight for sair een," came to my mind when I first looked upon 'Mrs Ben.' From the freshness and fullness of her charms you might have mistaken her for a dairymaid. But the intelligence that shone from a pair of rather small blue eyes—set very wide apart below a broad brow—suggested a habit of intercourse with the human rather than the bovine herd.

Her father a dalesman, and her mother a Cockney, the result was a dialect of some originality, and a character that combined the sturdy faithful qualities of the North country folk with the quick adaptability of the Londoner.

Few could convey a better welcome than she of the broad smile, which displayed a faultless row of white teeth; but woe betide you if you took advantage of that smile to make free with the dignity of Mrs Benham of Corner Street, or, for that matter, with Elizabeth, in her twenty years' capacity of confidential maid to the Fane family. Her mouth would then assume an expression as unapproachable as the silence of Ben himself. I have seen Dick's behaviour sour the milk of this good woman's kindness time and again; and in her severe moods she was an imposing spectacle—a Hebe withered by anger!

In this instance, the welcome I got from her showed that my fame had preceded me. Here was one who had been a favoured visitor in the old days of Greenfields Manor House, when the son and heir was but a schoolboy.

She led me into the drawing-room, and wondered (bless her heart!) whether she had ever seen me as a boy.

"You can't remember me, Mrs Benham, any more than can the present Lady of Greenfields," I said, smiling.

"My looks are deceiving, sir, and always 'ave been. I struck eighteen years the April before Miss Phillida was born."

"And my visits to Greenfields were more than twelve years before Mrs O'Neill was born; the

captain and I, as Birchester boys, whipped the river for fish and teased your father into taking us out rabbit shooting. Those were grand old days, Mrs Benham. It was a grand old house. And the General and his lady were grand folk of the old school, eh?"

"Ah, sir, you bring them to life as an apple to the eye!" The good woman was moving an occasional table in my direction. "You'll be staying till Master Dick comes in? He's due now, sir, if he's punctual."

As I consulted my watch, in walked the stupendous Ben—clothed in the perfect manner of the old family butler, bearing a silver tray.

Were there ever such teas turned out as the Bens produced in the twinkling of an eye for a favoured guest? There was a silent signal between this incomparable pair, and the visitor, thus blest, found an ambrosial feast set before him, as though borne on the wings of Pegasus direct from Mount Olympus, and merely handed to Ben, as a Ganymede of the underworld.

Crumpets and cakes, hot toast—heavenly bread and butter,—sandwiches, Scotch bun, and sponge fingers! Tell it not in Gath! But I have spoilt the enjoyment of more than one good dinner through indulgence in those Corner Street teas.

While the mute giant was spreading out these lordly adjuncts to the '*Thé simple*,' that was my

customary fare, Mrs Ben was detailing her woes.

"I feel that I've done as I shouldn't, sir, and it will help me considerable if you'll lend me an ear—seeing as you've come direct from Miss Phillida—my lady, I should say."

I lent her an ear, and incidentally learnt much of Phillida's lonely childhood.

With many digressions she informed me that Dick had come to Corner Street last Thursday (the very day he had written to his father), and finding the scarlet-fever quarantine was over, he had begged of the Bens to take him in at once.

"He seemed quite upset, sir, at the 'Ighgate place. He said the lady there was for letting 'is room to a married party, and he couldn't wait nohow, not even till 'is father wrote back. I told 'im we was looking to make terms with a family as wanted the whole 'ouse shortly, so it didn't suit me to take in a single gent. Come to that, sir, I wouldn't have done it but for my lady. Master Dick spoke as if she'd expect it of us—not that she'd written nothing herself to me,—but he, being the doctor's son—her husband, that is. You take me, sir?"

I did. (That boy should get on in the world, I thought.)

After doing full justice to Mrs Ben's tea, I was not surprised that Master Dick had used his best

arts to get the benefit of Corner Street cooking —till—when ?

That was the question.

This coup revealed to me that the boy was no fool, and that he had probably a clearer idea than his parents as to the prospective home of the future. I felt, too, I would rather not give him the opportunity of catechising me too closely as to my interview with Mrs Pike. It would be a bad beginning to my godfatherly interest in the boy if I were to start by 'catching him out' in this little game of his. It was natural, after all, he should make a bid for the comforts of Phillida's London home. That she would wish to be liberal in arranging the terms of any boarder of the Bens was evident; also that the Bens would not do otherwise than give their best attention to the stepson of their beloved lady.

Had Dick looked farther ahead, I wondered, and had he any other object in view ?

Mrs Ben now confided to me that the worst luck of her life had befallen her when Ben, taking scarlet fever from a patient, too ill to be moved, should have broken up her lady's home, making a quarantine, and a change to the sea, necessary.

"That's 'ow we missed being there, sir. We knew what was coming, but we never thought of her being married—not on a sudden like that. No company too, but them two children and

yourself, sir! Not that my lady 'as many kinsfolk and acquaintances, so to speak. . . . But for 'er loneliness I'd never 'ave encouraged 'er to make the fuss she did of Master Dick and Miss Matty. But, in a sense, she took it as a kind of religion, sir—the giving of 'erself, as you might say, to those pore orphans. Not that they struck one as such—bein' mighty pleased with theirselves. *No* 'anging back about them, when there was a chance o' something good going."

I realised, then, that for nearly two years before Barry's advent this boy and girl had given Phillida an experience of happy fellowship denied to her life so far. An only child, her youth had been robbed of its best inheritance, the comradeship of youth. She was as unconscious of her loss as her grandparents were of their responsibility in the matter.

The good woman thus explained Lady Fane and her exclusiveness. "It was feelin' the child was too good to run up agin the common herd that made my lady keep her from even the vicarage Christmas parties, but it was trouble she was brewing for the child in the days to come. Me and Ben and the old folk, that's all she knew of the world she'd been born into, for that foreign cockatoo of a mamselle was a non'tity, and the child didn't take no account of 'er."

Phillida, I found, was only twelve when Lady Fane succumbed to a heart attack, and a daily governess from Elton took the place of the French woman. Though evidently out of date—in Mrs Ben's words, "A narrer-minded dried-up thing!" —she was conscientious, the jealous nurse allowed. And she taught Phillida, among other things, the art of reading aloud, to the infinite benefit of herself and the old General, who had lost an eye in the Crimea, and whose sight had been failing ever since his wife's death.

In this way Phillida became, from fourteen to nineteen, according to Mrs Ben, "the lightning of her grandfather's eyes"; while he, on his side, had carefully placed a power, as well as a safeguard, into her hands by giving her an insight into business, as well as into the working of the great Greenfields estate.

In the second year of the war the old General had been laid low by a stroke from the shock of losing, in the war, his brother's only son, an Australian cousin of Phillida's and the prospective heir of Greenfields.

It was then the Bens had chosen Corner Street while Phillida was training as a V.A.D. pending the time when the family lawyer and the General's brother in Australia should have settled her affairs in accordance with her grandfather's will.

The correspondence which arose out of this trusteeship ended, I learnt, in a proposal from her great-uncle that she should make her home with him in Australia; and a letter had arrived, at the close of the war, with urgent instructions to come out as soon as peace should be declared.

This offer of a home, it appeared, came shortly after Barry's advent from the front.

"But a husband's worth a dozen uncles to my thinking," pursued Mrs Ben. "And from the moment I saw the doctor's 'at on the table, it kind of went through me, seeing he was everything that a gentleman should be. I'll not deny as 'ow Ben and me wished private-like he'd 'ad just a hinch more to 'is stature, sir. But that there major's lady—so like her sauce—thought it her duty to tell me the regiment set great store by 'im, as if I couldn't rekernise a real gentleman when I sees one. But there! Some folks must get into the pulpit the moment the parson's out of it."

"Did Mrs 'Major' approve of the engagement?" I asked with some curiosity, it must be confessed.

"Well, sir, she'd like to have thought the match was of *'er* making, she would. Anyways she up and shivers in pieces the *captain's* lady, when she bounces out with, 'That girl! Surely he's old enough to be her father!'"

Here Dick appeared, and I went through my facings pretty well without committing myself. I saw he was reassured when I said I had been too hurried to do more than get his address.

"I am glad to hear it, sir. She's an awful shark, Mrs Pike—goes in for a lot of sob stuff over her coal shortage, and that sort of thing; she's a bit slippery, too, in her facts."

Well, thought I, why not give the boy the benefit of the doubt, and make Mrs Pike responsible for the 'put-up' character of this rapid change of quarters?

I came to realise, later on, that Dick, in the flesh, could always convince one against one's better judgment. This faculty had, in his mother, amounted almost to genius, and Dick had inherited or imbibed the power to some extent. A fatal gift this to those who possess it, since it reacts so often to their own undoing, leaving them a prey to blind impulses: for ever doomed to plunge ahead along the road of Desire, unprotected by the safety brake of opposition.

Meantime I had no reason to be vexed over my unsuccess. I was, it is true, disappointed for Eve. I had broached the subject to her before looking up Dick; and finding that a young paying guest was just what she wanted, I had, once in a way, played the part of a self-denying friend.

For, to be candid, I wanted no audience to my visits there; the charm of this hidden retreat of mine in West Kensington would have been largely gone had I been called on to share my evenings with Dick.

CHAPTER V.

GROPING IN THE DARK.

WHETHER as a result of Barry's original choice, of Dick's manœuvring, or of Mrs Ben's yearning to wait upon 'her lady' as Mrs O'Neill, I know not; but Barry and Phillida came to Corner Street when the honeymoon was over. Whether Phillida was equally pleased to return to the wing of her old nurse, it was impossible to determine, owing to the calm impenetrable reserve that had so baffled me on her wedding day.

Detained in town by the serious condition of Eve's mother, I was a witness of the welcome awaiting the bride on her return. It was so eloquent of the blank her absence had made in Dick's life, no less than the Bens, that I imagined she could not but feel it spelt a home-coming.

Barry was immediately plunged into a vortex of work connected with his new appointment. He was scarcely ever at home, and the time and place of his meals were a daily uncertainty. No

one knew—the doctor himself least of all—when he could be counted upon to eat his meals in peace and safety, out of reach of the eternal telephone bell.

From early dawn to midnight he was liable to be called up; and he responded with the zest of a schoolboy and the rapture of a neophyte. He had merely received rather more than his share of that genius for altruism with which the medical profession is so richly endowed.

"A dog's life," I heard Dick call it a week after his father's return to work.

"You should have seen active service," was Barry's retort, and I noticed from that day forth Dick never again referred to his work as "that beastly grind at the bank."

The house in Marylebone Gardens having fallen through, Barry suggested that Phillida should start looking up possible quarters in the north of London, as near the hospital as possible. Dick eagerly offered her his help, after office hours, as well as at the luncheon interval; and they were soon in full cry after every small flat and house which a score of agents could collect from their lists of 'desirable residences.'

It was a fascinating form of sport to both, and one of which they never seemed weary. Phillida appealed in vain to Barry to join in the pleasures of the hunt.

"I must wait till you have caught your hare. I'll decide then if it's worth cooking," was his answer.

However, when I called the following Sunday, I found he had been persuaded by his wife to come with her that afternoon and look at a 'real find.'

"They're expecting you to tea, sir," was the greeting I got from Mrs Ben. "You was, please, to excuse them if they should be a bit late looking at the noo house, and I was to give you your tea at onst."

Dick had joined them, I found, to Mrs Ben's undisguised anger.

"The boy pushes himself into everythink," she remarked indignantly. "You'll excuse me, sir, making so free as to say so to you, but I've 'ad a job to keep my temper with Master Dick to-day. Ben 'ere thinks he understands 'im, and makes excuses, but I can't abide his cheek. What he wants is a good 'set down.' 'E's too clever! And sly like. He'll do himself a mischief some day. You can't prosper on foxy ways, nohow, leastways if you've been born on the first floor, so to speak."

Ben, who was laying the table, looked shocked at his wife's temerity. It actually inspired him to speech.

"He'd have been all right, sir, if he'd got to

the front. . . . Elizabeth's that vexed, she forgets herself," he added, wagging his head slowly.

"He's just 'it the mark, sir," agreed his wife. "That 'ud have straightened 'im and cured 'im of his peacocking. It's fighting that'll make a gen'leman of that sort—when nothing else will. And to do 'im justice he'd 'ave been there now, if the war 'adn't gone and killed itself, as you might say. . . ."

"Master Dick's a spoilt boy, that's the long and short of it," I said, to soothe her feelings.

"You 'ave put it in a nutshell, sir." Then she apologised. "There! I oughtn't to get waxy, the way I do at times, and Ben's 'ead's a-wagging now, which means 'e thinks I've lost myself."

As if to confirm her words, Ben shook his head with undue emphasis as he left the room—after placing a choice of cigars and cigarettes at my elbow.

His wife's next remark was to give the chink of light I had been groping for among the good woman's reflections.

"If Master Dick'd only treat my lady in a more becoming way," she remarked as she made my tea from the bubbling kettle beside me, "I'd forgive 'im everythink. Instead, he carries on, just as he used to do when he thought she was nothing more nor his sister's nurse. Not that I

was ever 'appy, sir, as you might say, over this laying aside of my lady's real name—' going into a cogwheel,' the grand folks call it. And yet I couldn't let on to the children, seeing as 'ow they 'adn't the ghost of an idea who Sister Phillis stood for. And the doctor hisself knew no more than the children, for my lady only wrote official-like to him about Miss Matty. Still, I only does 'im justice, sir, when I sez that *'is* manner never changed nor yet that worshipful look. If you'll believe me, sir, Ben and me we saw it settle on 'is face, from the very moment as 'e first set eyes on 'er."

Here was, indeed, a clue to the path by which Barry had been led to woo and to win the heiress of Greenfields. I was thoroughly intrigued. Yet this girl, with her baffling reserve, was at once too Victorian and too modern to court an escapade or a phantasy! No romantic motive here at work —such as in some past period would have prompted the suppression of name and fortune, in order to test the sincerity of a score of applicants for the hand of the Lady of the Manor. It was equally impossible to imagine that she had espied the qualities of a 'parfaite knight' beneath the disguise of the little doctor, whose manner, when not silent and absorbed, was apt to resemble the irritable attitude of the old woman who lived in a shoe.

That such a man could have captivated a girl of Phillida Fane's age and upbringing was inconceivable. Had Barry been possessed of lands or fortune, then all fell into the range of the possible. On the other hand, had he been as other men, the temptation to secure so fair a fortune was imaginable—granted the opportunity. But here was a chink of light. Could it be that Barry had committed himself, for his children's sake, if not for his own, before the lady had doffed her domino ?

Barry always took for granted that every man's motives were as disinterested as his own, and herein lay, as I think, his singular power over men. But what girl would ever discover, much less be swayed by, this trait in a man ?

I would have welcomed any further illuminating remarks that Mrs Ben might have passed on this ' turn of events,' as she was pleased to call her lady's hasty marriage. But she left her narrative of the courtship in order to explain her own conduct, lest I might throw the blame upon *her*.

" But my lady 'as always known 'er own mind, sir, for all that her granny never gave 'er a chanst to use it as a child—and I seen from the first she never meant to be led by that there uncle of hers ; and why indeed should she, seeing that she knew 'im no more than Joseph's brethren. If you can't choose your own 'usband when you've

turned twenty-five and own a fortune to do what you will with—who can, sir? At least that's what my lady felt."

How much more of Phillida's ideas on money and matrimony were to be confided to me I know not, for at that moment the family returned.

I had then to exchange Mrs Ben's criticism of Dick and his manners for Barry's criticism of the house he had just returned from inspecting. When he pronounced it dark, and called in question the soundness of the drains, Dick took it as a personal reflection on his judgment, and became huffed and moody.

Phillida allowed no sense of disappointment to invade *her* calm. She noticed, I felt sure, that her husband was in no hurry to take the plunge; but she was naturally without the clue to his reasons for hesitating to embark on an establishment of his own. She could not realise that Barry was, for the first time in his life, enjoying the luxury of a well-ordered household. No one had ever valeted him as Ben was now doing in the capacity of house-parlour man to the family; and Mrs Ben saw to it that, at whatever hour he came in, a hot meal and a cup of coffee was ready for him without fail.

After his previous experience in regard to a home of his own, this sudden unlooked-for access of consideration to his smallest needs might well

bewilder him and lead him to cling, however unconsciously, to their present peaceful habitation.

Dick, too, seemed to be pleasantly affected by the atmosphere of Corner Street. The dominating temper, which characterised him from a child, appeared a thing of the past; and already, as I began to suspect, he was inclined to hold Mrs Ben and her husband in greater awe than Phillida or his father, and to conform to their rule with less opposition.

The whole combined to make a calm haven of rest such as Barry had never yet enjoyed. Hence, without doubt, his dread of entering upon uncharted seas. He was quite unaware, I felt sure, of the fact that this state of things was part and parcel of a Quaker inheritance, and that Phillida was the embodiment of its disciplined beauty. He simply accepted its blessing as the outcome of the faithful well-trained services of a couple of servants of the old régime, and felt himself favoured beyond his deserts; while Phillida herself, I could see, spelt for him a miracle he daily marvelled over.

To him she moved like some enchanted being, guarded from contaminating contact with the coarser types of humanity about her.

On this occasion, as always, she was in no way disturbed by his criticism of the little Hampstead house, only amused by Dick's hot resentment

of any reflection thrown on their choice. Then, noticing her husband's weariness, I saw her quietly set aside the whole subject, checking Dick's inclination to reopen the argument.

But when, at the end of a quarter of an hour, a telephone call had sent Barry flying off before he had swallowed so much as a cup of tea, Phillida did not attempt to interrupt Dick's voicing his views on the situation.

He began resentfully, "I am not going on with this wild goose chase. It's all moonshine. Fah will turn down every single flat or house that comes along. He's not going to budge. Why should I waste my time?"

"I'm sorry," said Phillida gently. "You needn't have come. You know I thought you liked house-hunting."

This brought Dick down from his high horse.

"Of course, I like doing anything *with you*, but it makes one feel such a fool"—and foolish I hope he did feel in another way. It was check-mate.

If he grumbled at staying on at Corner Street, the obvious retort was that he had chosen it himself; and now by objecting to house-hunting, he only proved himself a churlish fool. Clearly his real grievance lay in the fact that his father did not care a hang about Dick's personal views on the subject.

There lay the sting. He, who could sway his mother by a look, and his father through his mother, had now grown to be of no account. His pride was hurt—that was evident; and the instinct for retaliation was bound, I knew, to be strong within him, though it did not come to the surface.

"Why should it make you feel foolish any more than it does me?" queried Phillida, half amused.

"It's a different pair of shoes for you," said Dick sullenly.

I had left the circle of the tea-table and had moved to the window to consult Bradshaw. The young people talked on without restraint. Suddenly my attention was caught by hearing Dick say—

"You don't know Fah as I do."

"Don't I?" The words were spoken with a little laugh, but her manner struck the note of reserve. It also held a suggestion of rebuke.

"Well, you see, for one thing you don't realise what his dislike to the idea of a new house amounts to." (Dick's voice was lowered a little.) "I know it's simply because he can't stand the idea of seeing the old furniture again." (How I wished Barry were there to say "Rot.") "It is all so bound up with my mother—you can have no

idea how he worshipped her. And then there's her picture."

"What picture?"

"Oh, didn't you know Kellerman painted her? It was one of the great pictures in the Academy of that year. I remember going when I was only ten years old to see it: a full length affair, would take up the whole side of that Hampstead dining-room. I can't see where it would go; but, of course, Fah would not care to talk about it to *you?*"

There was a hint of inquiry in the tone that I felt must surely grate upon Phillida, as it did upon me. I inwardly sympathised with Mrs Ben. But who was to administer the set-down?

There was a pause.

When Phillida spoke again it was to move her chair in my direction, and, ignoring Dick, to say with a charming touch of intimacy—

"I wonder whether you remember the Greenfields furniture, Colonel Carmichael? I have a lot of it in store, and it has just occurred to me it would be better to use *that* than my husband's, which Dick tells me has sad associations."

"I was not too young, even at seventeen, to enjoy looking at some of the best Sheraton and Chippendale in England," I answered, delighted at her appeal. "That tallboy in Lady Fane's boudoir, for instance."

"Boudoir!" said the irrepressible boy. "Then it must be a big house, Phee. You have never told us anything about it except that it is let, furnished.

"Perhaps you have never realised that Greenfields is one of the Homes of England," I said a little wickedly, turning to Dick.

"Oh yes, of course," he answered, promptly giving himself away. "I knew it was an old house, right enough; but if it's let furnished, you can't have enough *stored* to use in the Hampstead house."

Phillida smiled. "You shall come and see it—in store—some day soon; then you will be able to judge. Now I know the real difficulty, I feel more hopeful about our getting over it."

Dick clearly felt uneasy, and no wonder!

"But you won't tell Fah I spoke—he might be ratty with me," he muttered.

"Of course not, but"—she meditated—"why should he be?" Then after a pause, "We must go on Monday afternoon and look up those sanitary people about the drains. But don't you come if it makes you feel annoyed with Fah. . . . I can't bear *that!*"

Who could face the transparent honesty of the girl's eyes and harbour angry thoughts? Dick's temper vanished—as well it might. Such a personality as Phillida's must surely tend to make

the crooked straight in this boy's mental outlook.

At that moment Barry returned from a long discussion on the telephone with the house surgeon. Finding he was to be free for the evening, I decided to give the newly married pair the chance of a quiet time together by taking Dick back to dine with me at the Club.

CHAPTER VI.

DICK UNBURDENS HIMSELF.

THE boy was becomingly delighted at the proposal. Apart from granting the Corner Street household a respite from Dick that evening, I felt it was up to me to get at the source of his evident annoyance with Barry.

One thing was certain. At nineteen Dick was feeling, as nineteen often does, that he understood a great deal more than people gave him credit for; that, in fact, he understood other people far better than they understood him.

I found that he was convinced he knew exactly what Phillida's feelings towards his father amounted to—he had no doubts whatever on the subject. She had married Barry to avoid being exiled to Australia. He was equally convinced that his father was a fool to have married her. The sense that his father was given to being a fool, had, I knew, been present to him from childhood. It was nothing new; he had first

imbibed the consciousness of it from his mother, and grew up with the idea that they had both to adapt themselves and their action to this state of mind in Barry. Now, under altered conditions, he evidently felt this lack of worldly wisdom in his father to have deplorable results.

After we had dined quietly together, his boyish vanity and sense of self-importance getting the better of him, he expanded more and more, till at length he delivered himself of his final confidence.

"I understand Fah's action in this. But what does *she* want with an old cove like him? She's plenty of money; I know that now, and I found it out a jolly sight quicker than Fah did. *He's* no catch for her, and twenty years too old. Her position's better than his; anyone can see *that*—and she's a bit of an aristocrat, too, isn't she?"

He looked charming, appealing to me, though never waiting for my answer.

"A fellow told me he was sure of it, though no one knew anything about her—when she was at the Carr Hospital. The young chaps there daren't get chummy with her, though some of them wanted to make love to her; but she was very stand-off with every fellow except me. That's why I had such a jolly time of it, taking her about in her off time. She was certainly frightfully decent to me; treated me like a brother of sorts. She's young for her age, don't you think,

sir ? Not mixed much with the world either. . . . Matty and I are far more the right sort of pals for her than Fah can be. He married her—anyone could see—for Matty's sake and mine, to give us a home, seeing how fond we were of her and she of us. But it was a great mistake. He'll never get over Mum's death—poor old chap ! "

I was divided between an itching desire to administer the ' set-down ' which Mrs Ben had well surmised the boy was in need of, and the resolve I had made to encourage his confidential mood, if only to find out what his contempt for Barry amounted to.

That it was something more than the modern habit of ruling out the parental point of view I was certain—recalling, as I could, this boy at the age of nine, equally lacking then in any reverence for authority or age, and without any idea of truth or discipline. But in those days he had the charm of the Italian reared child, gentle and sophisticated, the constant companion of his mother.

After enjoying years as a day scholar at Brayminster School, he had lost, I could see, the suavity and courtesy of the Continental boy without having acquired our public-school standard of reticence and honour ; for he had remained his mother's companion out of school hours. She had seen to that.

"Poor Mums was never happy unless I was with her." That was his view of it.

That he had no idea of the extent of my friendship with Barry and his mother was clear. To have spoken of it would have been to court the catechism I was doing my best to avoid. I was, moreover, profoundly ignorant as to what the boy's knowledge of the past amounted to.

As if in answer to my inner musings, he suddenly said, "Did you ever see Kellerman's portrait of my mother that I was talking to Phee about this afternoon? Mums left it to me, and it's a shame to have it buried away. . . . You must have known my mother, of course, sir?"

"I saw Kellerman's portrait of your mother in Italy when it was being painted. I don't wonder your father feels responsible over such a picture, seeing he is one of the trustees — as well as myself."

This was said on impulse, with a sudden disregard of caution. For here was I, an old fogey, flattering myself this boy was making a confidant of me, while all the while he had set himself to pump me. To find out, in fact, how much I knew of the family while prettily parading Barry's deathless devotion to his mother!

The tone of the "Oh!" with which he greeted my statement confirmed me in my belief as to the drift of his talk.

It was the first piece of information he had got from me.

I then volunteered the remark, "You must surely have some photos of your mother—something besides the portrait?"

"Oh, Lord, yes! But they're all buried, too, along with the furniture."

I could recall the endless photographs of Esmé in every style and costume.

Then after a pause he added, "It'll be a long time before Fah can stand any sight of the old things, I'm sure. I've got a wedding group of theirs at Corner Street, but he couldn't bear the sight of it, even when Mums was alive. He was in a great wax one day at her getting it out. I asked her about it afterwards, and she told me there was a cousin of hers in the group Fah could never abide. They had an awful quarrel after the wedding—over something—she didn't know what—but none of her people could bear her marriage with Fah. You know they are a titled family, the Dundarran Gordons . . . a castle in Ireland, you know. I daresay you've heard all about the quarrel, sir, as they were both in your regiment?"

"Being a family quarrel it had nothing to do with me or the regiment," I answered rather hotly, adding, "A man's sense of honour and a man's reserve about such matters is always

great. Barry's is greater than that of any man I know. . . .

"I am very glad, my dear boy," I went on more calmly, "that you've spoken so frankly to me about these matters as an old friend of your father's; but if you talked to outsiders like that, they might get a wrong impression of your parents."

"Oh yes, of course, sir." The boy was evidently sensitive as well as bumptious; there was a gleam of tears in his eyes—those Irish eyes of Esmé's.

"I hope you don't think I'd say what I have if you weren't my godfather, and so jolly and friendly. Perhaps you think I'm a cad. But I'm sick of my own thoughts—bottled-up thoughts. Fah used to talk a lot to me when Mums was alive. He can't open his mouth now. Hurts him, I suppose. Everything's changed. Even Phee's changed," the boy wound up resentfully.

"Take time, my dear chap. It'll work out all right in the long-run; only don't get rattled or sour over it. It ruins one's sporting instincts."

We parted that night the best of friends, but after he had left me a discomposing thought possessed me. Remembering Esmé and the old days, I wondered how much sincerity lay behind Dick's talk. . . .

CHAPTER VII.

AN OLD PORTFOLIO.

CHRISTMAS was approaching, and as there seemed no change to be expected in the condition of Eve's mother, I had no longer any excuse for delaying my return to Edward and the Riviera. I called, in consequence, at Corner Street to make my adieux, and had the luck to find Barry at home.

I learnt that Phillida and Dick were 'house-hunting' as usual, but Barry begged me to stay on for dinner and thus get a sight of the family. Mrs Ben was summoned, and showed unqualified pleasure. "It was only an extra plate."

But when eight o'clock arrived and brought no sign of the hunters, Mrs Ben made her appearance, in no gracious mood, to ask if she was to wait, as the dinner was spoiling. Barry looked troubled, not over the delayed dinner, but over the fact that he had never once known Phillida behind time before.

Five minutes after this they turned up, and we could hear good Mrs Ben scolding them.

"Just to-day, too, when the Colonel's here—waiting,—and you've given the doctor a fright, to say nothing of having spoilt the dinner."

The door being open, I heard Dick's voice of muttered rebellion, "It's generally we who wait."

Then Phillida walked, without a word, straight into the doctor's sanctum.

She made a radiant effect as she entered the room that December evening, her grey furs setting off the russet tones of her hair and the vivid colour in her cheeks.

The look of relief that came over Barry's face at sight of her was so manifest that she could only laugh and say, "Did you expect to see me 'borne before you on a shutter'?"

"That comes of always being in to the minute. I was just saying that it's the first time I ever knew you late."

"*There's* a reputation for punctuality to live up to," said I. "I'm always late, so no one's hair turns grey picturing me under a car."

Phillida's welcome was as warm and genuine as any bachelor, happing on a family at dinner-time, could wish. She slipped out, and appeared, barely fifteen minutes later, in a liberty frock that enveloped her like a soft blue cloud, and with no other ornament than the Broadbent pearls.

There was about her the unmistakable air of breeding, the quiet deliberation, too, that recalled Lady Fane. Yet, perhaps, for that very reason, she lacked entirely the modern note of smartness; lacked also the small change coined by her generation—its quick banter—constant chatter; its laugh—its slang.

As the guest of the evening, for the first time, I noted all this in my hostess; noted, too, the look of content that her presence brought to Barry's face, even when the restless eye and nervous frown spoke to the strain of overwork.

Dick came in late, with a muttered apology.

After exchanging glances and an informal greeting, I continued the subject I was discussing with Barry. For some reason the boy's vanity was hurt by this apparent indifference to his existence. He was the more incensed I could see, since it came out in our talk, that I had been a constant visitor at their old home at Santa Margherita, and must therefore have known his mother; above all, must have remembered him as a child.

He suddenly broke in upon some discussion we were having on Italian politics to say, "I'm sure now I remember you, sir, as a small boy, in that Italian house of ours. I must have been about five or six then, wasn't I?"

"Were you?" I queried in reply, a little

nettled by the childish interruption, and I saw Phillida caught by the fact that Barry, too, was in a hurry to pick up the broken thread of the argument. She at once deftly engaged Dick in a cross-fire of comment on their latest house-hunting exploit.

But Dick was not to be put off so easily. He chose the moment when Ben had executed a *pas seul*—wellnigh upsetting himself as well as the dish of meringues he was about to hand round. The contortions by which he sought to recover his footing, came near to upsetting Phillida's gravity. Her eyes met mine, and we exchanged a look of mutual understanding. Till then I had judged her somewhat lacking in a sense of humour.

Barry's in luck, thought I. To find a wife who combines integrity of mind and a calm vision with an eye for the funny side of things. That is, indeed, to be blest of the gods!

Dick, meantime, had seized his opportunity and returned to the attack. "What was the name of that house of yours in Italy, Fah?" he was asking.

"Miramar," Barry answered shortly.

"I asked," said Dick with insistence, "because I think I've got a sketch of it, still, with a verandah and a pergola. It has Miramar on the back of it."

I turned to the boy, repenting me of my indifference. "Yes, yes, that's the house—quite charming it was,—I made a sketch of it at the time."

"I think I could find it," said Dick, evidently pleased at the cordiality in my voice.

"All right, some other time," his father muttered; "don't bother about it now."

Here Phillida turned to Dick and said in an undertone: "We'll hunt it up together, tomorrow, when we are sorting out those school groups I am getting framed for you."

The sympathy in her look and tone was not lost to me. Dick, I decided, had no grounds for grievance with regard to any change in Phillida.

Dinner over, we repaired to the drawing-room—Mrs Ben having prepared coffee and a blazing fire there, in my honour I was told.

"This is Liberty Hall," said Barry; "we smoke everywhere. Only don't offer my wife a cigarette unless you want to offend her."

"No fear," said I; "Lady Fane would turn in her grave, I am sure, at such a possibility."

Phillida and I then plunged into a store of Greenfield memories, thus discovering that Carmichaels and Fanes were not only friends of the past, but that Phillida, at the age of ten, had stayed for a night at our Lincolnshire shooting-box with Lady Fane.

Barry had detached himself and was setting to work to stoke the fire—a very unnecessary proceeding.

Dick, who had slipped upstairs when the party left the dining-room, now appeared with a bulky portfolio, and coming deliberately up to me, presented me with a faded sketch.

"Here it is, sir."

This time I forgave the interruption. I am weakly fond of my old sketches.

"Yes, by Jove, so it is—my own, too, and my writing at the back."

Barry, still at work on the fire, merely muttered, "Queer, that!" without looking round.

The next moment—whether Dick handed the wedding group to Phillida, or whether the girl, catching sight of it in the open portfolio, took it up, I never knew—I was looking at my own sketch when, hearing her gasp of astonishment, I turned sharply, and caught the eager voice with which she said, "Oh, who is *that?* How like——"

"Like me?" I interrupted her. "Isn't it? It *was* me, you know. I was best man on that occasion; but rather the worse for wear since those days. Couldn't believe it was me, what?"

As I have said before, Phillida seldom blushed, but when moved, the colour flooded her face and neck. It did so on this occasion, and I groped

for a clue to this sudden emotion. Did she see me deliberately move her finger from the slender young subaltern standing just behind the bride, to the taller, heavier-built man beside the bridegroom?

Caught by the eagerness in his wife's voice, Barry, still kneeling before the fire, turned his face at the sound.

"What a beautiful bride," she murmured, recovering her usual calm. She looked at me, mute inquiry in her eyes.

I answered it by saying, "Her cousin is standing behind her. You see the likeness in Dick to both, of course."

Was it my own sense of emotion in the air, I wondered, that made my voice, no less than hers, sound strained? But instantly her eyes, following my glance—an anxious glance at Barry by the fire—saw, as I did, his figure kneeling there, as though shaken by cold, his face ashen white. It was—

"My dear fellow——"

"Barry——"

Both she and I had sprung up. At the same moment Barry leapt to his feet, clattering the fire-irons.

"I'm all right; what's the fuss?" He snapped round upon me, but his voice ended in a feeble growl.

I was not to be put off by a growl, however.

"My dear fellow, you're tired to death, and here you are mending this blazing fire. No wonder you're feeling queer!"

I had a momentary vision of Dick—all eyes and ears—when Mrs Ben appeared at the door, like a pleasant breath of fresh air in a stifling room, to say that Dr Simmons wanted a word with the doctor on the 'phone.

Barry was out of the room like a shot; and Phillida broke the silence that followed his departure by turning reproachfully on Dick.

"How could you! And after what you yourself told me—that he could not bear old associations? I don't understand you, Dick!"

The boy answered back sullenly, "Why should you blame me? *I* did not mean you to touch or talk about that photo. Anyway, it just shows you how Fah's upset at the sight of anything to do with Mums. But everybody blames me for everything. You're as bad as Mrs Ben."

Phillida's voice was ominously quiet. "Is that fair, Dick? Neither your father nor I have ever criticised you—so far."

I divined a situation, if not a revelation, too dangerous to contemplate. Barry's absence was something to be thankful for, under the circumstances.

The girl faced the boy, indignation in her tone, tenderness in her eyes.

As they stood there looking at each other, I saw the sullen anger in Dick's face turn to admiration, as well it might—so beautiful was Phillida, in this rare moment of unexplained emotion. Transformed from the calm, level-headed woman of every day. It was as though he had seen her for the first time; and Phillida, too, stood staring at Dick, as though she saw him in a new light.

"I'm sorry Fah's upset by that photo. He always hated that man—Major Gordon. He was a cousin of Mums, you know. They quarrelled at the time of her marriage—as I told you, sir," Dick faltered lamely, turning to me.

"*Major Gordon!* Barry hated Major Gordon!" repeated Phillida, in a strained voice.

Then, with another dazed look at me, she passed quickly out of the room.

Dick shut the portfolio and went upstairs with it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST.

It was an evening of cataclysms!

I followed Phillida out of the drawing-room in search of Barry, and found him in the consulting room answering the telephone.

"Let one of the other chaps go—you're dead-beat to-night, old boy," I protested, hearing him say he would "come at once."

But he dashed past me into the hall, where he met Phillida.

"Must you go, Barry?" she pleaded, with wifely deference to the professional claim.

"Of course—why not? I'm all right. It was just that beastly hot fire. Don't sit up for me, mind!"

He flew back into the consulting-room to telephone an order to the chemist, and in that moment I turned to Phillida. We were standing together in the hall.

"Don't spoil that boy," I said, on an impulse.

"His mother ruined him as a child, by giving way to him in everything."

"Poor Dick!" The girl's face was alight with misplaced sympathy. "He adores her memory!"

"Her memory! Yes. . . . I daresay. But in her lifetime he rode rough-shod over her!"

Phillida looked bewildered. The statement was evidently at variance with *her* ideas of the past.

Barry was in the hall again, flinging himself into his overcoat.

I drew on mine, and taking up my hat, said: "We might walk to the tube together, what?"

"Good! So long as you don't jaw like an old nurse." Barry was clearly in one of his F.F. moods.

"Mind you come and see us again soon," was all Phillida said, but the appeal of her eyes was more eloquent than her words.

As she opened the door for us she cast an anxious look at Barry, and I could not but own to myself that she was justified in her concern. For he stood there, stooping more than usual, with something of a shrunken look—he, a man little over five-and-forty.

I was almost ashamed of my own stalwart frame. Four years his senior, I felt a boy beside him. Thanks to an iron constitution and a life of sport, the years had dealt kindly with me,

whereas they had made a heavy drain on Barry's forces, more especially during the term of his war services in Salonika.

We walked together, in silence, through the Square towards the lights of Oxford Street, each busy with his own thoughts.

That cursed photo, I felt sure, loomed large in the minds of both of us.

I was the first to break the silence. With some hesitation I began: "Barry, my dear fellow, you surely won't keep that boy in your new home? You'll let him start soon on his own, I hope?"

"Why?" was all I got in reply.

"Well—you're too busy for one thing, and your wife's too young to keep an eye on him—eh?"

This time Barry's response was something that sounded like, "They're old friends."

"But does she realise?" I began.

"Realise! Confound you!" He snapped round upon me ominously. "That girl! What d'you mean? Besides, if *you*'ve forgotten your promise to Esmé—*I* haven't!" The words seemed dragged from him.

"If you can say that, then all's over between us as friends," was my retort, for he spoke resentfully, and I was hurt.

"No—no, don't take me up like that. Do

you think I've forgotten all you went through—and what you did——"

"Shut up, for God's sake, Barry. That's barred." I laughed huskily.

"It's just that I can't bear the idea of speaking of it—*you* understand."

"Of course I do, my dear chap. I only said that because—well, a wife's a part of you, what?"

"Yes, yes. But here we are! Another day—we'll talk it over, if I can——"

"*Never*, unless you want to. You must think I have become a confounded old meddler."

"No fear—*à rivederci!*" It was an echo of the old Italian days, and, like Barry, he flung me the words as a peace offering. Then the ticket queue swallowed him up and I walked back to the Club, threading my way through the hub and throng of Piccadilly. Blind to its glare, deaf to its noise—my thoughts possessed by the Past, that stubbornly refused to die a natural death. Ghost-like, it followed me as though dogging my steps, with the memory of Barry's futile sacrifice—a sacrifice I knew to be more responsible for his stooping gait than any war services,—a sacrifice, too, that even now seemed like to wreck his first chance of happiness.

And Dick, who embodied it all, was by an unlucky fate—my godson.

CHAPTER IX.

A CONFIDENTIAL TALK.

So anxious was I to avoid anything that might savour to Barry of importunate haste in my next visit, or strike Phillida as too literal a reading of her request, that I left my next call till the very day before my departure for Hyères. As far as I was concerned, my mind was more at rest as to the dangers attending a *tête-à-tête* with Phillida.

I now knew how matters stood.

It was clear not only that Phillida was wholly ignorant of the tragedies of the past, but also that Barry had decreed that she should remain so. Never again would I broach the subject with regard to which Barry and I had, till to-day, maintained an unbroken silence. It now only remained for me to gather from Dick, if possible, what impression of the past *he* had given to his stepmother. I had spoken impulsively when I contradicted her assertions as to Dick's devotion to his mother. For what, after all, did I know of

the family relations between those three for the last eight years of Esmé's ill-starred life, the two last of which had been spent in London when Barry rejoined the regiment ?

Arriving at Corner Street, I found a different atmosphere from the one I left behind me on my last visit.

They had all just returned, exhausted, from an afternoon in the Christmas bazaars, the whole party clearly dominated by the shopping mania that seizes every household under the sway of children's holidays.

In this case the ruling spirit appeared to be Matty.

Her arrival in Corner Street, the day after the invidious wedding group had come to light, was certainly calculated to sweep the whole affair from Barry's mind ; and Phillida's energies appeared entirely absorbed by a variety of Christmas festivities of a charitable nature—children's parties, church decorations, hospital entertainments, and the like.

Matty gave nobody else a chance of imparting any news. She rattled off the family doings since her arrival as though she were the moving factor in the Corner Street household. Her startling improvement in growth and good looks was evidently a great source of pride and satisfaction to both Barry and Phillida. It was easy

to realise now how her health—or rather the want of it—had been originally the determining factor in drawing these two together.

I was quite complimented by the consternation shown at my departure for France on the morrow.

"You never let us know you were going off to the Riviera for Christmas," said Dick, in a tone that suggested I ought certainly to have consulted *him* on the subject.

Phillida received the news with a look of genuine dismay that touched me more than any remark.

Matty had mercifully left the room, so that Barry and I had a chance to wrangle over politics in peace, Mrs Ben having brought me tea, despite the hour.

Then it was that Dick suddenly remarked, "We've made no way in the house-hunting business, sir, since you were here last," upon which Barry turned eagerly to Phillida.

"Nor we have! You and Dick will have to be taking up your job again as soon as Christmas is over; and I must try to be more easily pleased than I was by your last efforts. I don't think Dick has ever yet forgiven me," he added, laughing.

Dick, who was examining a new pair of skates, merely grunted.

"And then we must go into the matter of furnishing."

I was watching Phillida, sitting silently—a little apart, her fingers pleasantly at work over some dainty piece of white needlework, and was struck by the effect upon her of Barry's words. Her mind was clearly greeting a sudden and unlooked-for opportunity.

She raised her eyes, and, meeting mine, blushed ; then turning to Barry said, with her usual deliberation, " I have a certain amount of the Greenfields furniture which I put in store before it was let. I should like to use *that* for the new house."

" First rate," said Barry, beaming. (He was a different man from the nervous individual of ten days ago.) " It will be more worthy of the new house than my poor lot that Maple has in store. Nothing much there but barrack-room stuff, well battered by the children ; eh, Dick ? "

No answer from Dick.

" I think we must get some good second-hand stuff to fit in with yours," Barry went on. " Jim, you're a dab at that sort of thing ; you will have to give us the benefit of your advice. But we must not forget—Esmé's portrait—well worth hanging in any room, Phee—a lovely thing by Kellerman."

At this moment the peaceful atmosphere of the drawing-room was invaded by that fearsome whirlwind, Matty. She announced, imperatively, that her father had promised to finish some

important shopping with her after tea, and Barry rose, obedient to her summons.

Dick, who had so far contributed nothing to the discussion—except to start the subject—now glanced up at Phillida as his father left.

She was standing by the mantelpiece, pondering, her foot on the fender. Dick joined her at the fire, muttering in a low voice which seemed to exclude me, though I felt instinctively that the words were intended for my benefit: "That was Dad all over—no one could ever guess what it cost him to say all that. He must be thankful, anyway, that you suggested putting *your* stuff into the new house. But *I* shall insist on keeping Mum's furniture for my room to use when I set up in digs. . . . I have a right to it. . . . He can't very well refuse it to me."

"He won't want to refuse you that, or any of it," said Phillida, amazing me by a wholly unlooked-for display of temper.

Dick's astonishment was as great as my own. We were both staring at her, nonplussed, when the ubiquitous Matty turned up again—this time to annex Dick.

"We are going to buy—you know what"—in mysterious tones,—"and we're much more likely to get smartly served if *you* come with us. I wish *you* would, too," said she, turning to me, like the proverbial horse-leech's daughter, "for

you're tall and good-looking, as well as Dick . . . so we should get served mighty quick by the girls."

Phillida made a pained protest under her breath.

"Detestable child!" was my own inward comment, my audible one being a refusal to miss my chance of a "quiet chat with Mrs O'Neill."

Here Barry hastily put in his head. "Stopping to dinner, of course, Jim. You keep him, Phee, while I satisfy this child's craze for living at Hamley's."

As the door closed behind them, Phillida invited me to a fireside chair, and, waving aside my attempt to assist her, deftly stirred the sleepy embers to a blaze.

I saw the sudden opportunity, and her direct simplicity of speech, struggling against the reserve that was habitual to her; so to help matters forward, I plunged into apology.

"I, too, have been wanting to call and finish the talk that I began upon the other night. I wanted to congratulate you on the improvement in that boy since he came under your influence. Whereas, the only remark I achieved must have seemed both impertinent and critical."

"I took it just the other way," was her answer. "It cheered me immensely; and—it gives me courage to ask your advice."

She laid aside her dainty piece of work, and clasped her hands behind her back, giving that delightful sense of undivided attention to the matter in hand that not only bespoke a woman of business, but one who understood a man's dislike to a conversation embroidered by feminine pursuits. It is a habit I, for one, find only forgiveable when philandering is the matter in hand. On such occasions I am ready to grant it artistic qualities.

"Please stay where you are, and let me stand. I have always done sentinel to the fireplace since I was a child. . . . I do want to ask your advice. You know my husband better than I can possibly do, yet. Do you think, as Dick does, that his dislike to launching this new house is a dread of old associations? You heard what Barry himself said, just now? It has almost made me doubt Dick—Dick's judgment, I mean." She paused.

"Almost doubt Dick!" How long, I wondered, would she remain only *almost* doubting Dick?

Like all upright people of high moral courage, accustomed to direct and deliberate speech, she was not prone to doubting the veracity of others. That form of doubt comes only to the Phillidas of this life in maturity or when embittered by some early experience of treachery or desertion.

I answered her appeal by saying: "If I know Barry at all, his shrinking from starting a new home has nothing to do with the past, except inasmuch as his comfort and ease here—ease of mind and body—makes him pause to look before he leaps. He has never, I am sure, been so happy or so peaceful in his life before."

"Thank you," she said. There was a ring of gratitude and a note of relief in her tone that was rather pathetic.

"Dick cannot, I think, really understand his father," she went on, picking up the thread of her own thoughts again and reverting to Dick.

"His mother never could," I punctuated.

"Oh—then it is not surprising Dick can't."

After another pause, she added: "His father seems quite unable to understand Dick either!"

"Remember they've both been out of touch nearly four years," I hazarded, amending the remark by adding, "Dick and his mother, on the contrary, were inseparable; perhaps that is why they were no help to each other as mother and son."

"You mean they were merely a reflection of one another?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Dick's loyalty to his mother is tremendous, and I love him for it," she said, with sudden

emphasis, as though to contradict my previous suggestion that the boy bullied his mother. "I think I understand him better in some ways than his father does, but it has been difficult to let him speak to me about these family quarrels and things that his father, naturally, never refers to. Dick is such a boy, he doesn't understand how impossible it is——" She spoke with effort and of set purpose. Was she warning me?

No, I decided, she was too direct for that.

". . . Impossible for me to listen," came at last.

"Exactly," I said, "I have the same difficulty with Dick myself. He has not been long enough in the atmosphere of school, nor yet among men, to learn the reticences that obtain in life—among men, soldiers in particular. But after all, in these post-war days, reserve is growing quite out of date. Everybody now writes and gossips about their own or other people's private affairs, in the hope that some reporter may find something shocking enough to print."

Phillida ignored this. Cavilling at fashionable society no doubt seemed frivolous waste of time to her.

She kept to her point. "It is strange that as a father Barry has no real influence over his boy

now that they are together. Dick used to be so enthusiastic over him while he was abroad. Now he seems disappointed somehow. . . ." She clearly could go no further, and I remembered my talk with Dick.

"Barry is far too fine a nature for a boy like Dick to even dimly understand," I said, hurt in some mysterious way. "Barry never does himself justice. For one thing, he is incapable of posing in any way——" I suddenly realised I was talking to someone who had no thought of Barry as I knew him—the Barry of Birchester days, of Komankotal and Santa Margherita. She was right in saying, "You know him better than I can possibly do—yet." How long would it take her to discover the Barry that was mine?

A silence fell between us.

Then she said a little shyly, "I don't know whether it would be fair to ask you——"

There was the click of the latch-key, and Matty was upon us, followed by Dick.

Barry had been waylaid on the very threshold.

"Some beastly accident," Dick explained, in making me his father's apologies.

He seemed pleased to think he could do the honours, in Barry's place. But, instead of a quiet smoke after dinner, Matty gave us no peace till she had commandeered us all into experi-

menting on a new game, of an altogether senseless description.

In spite of this, I enjoyed my evening. Barry, however, never turned up, and I left for Hyères next day, without getting another word with him or Phillida.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER CHANCE MEETING.

EDWARD, as usual, claimed me from Christmas to Whitsun, and no news of the O'Neills penetrated to Hyères.

On my return to London in May I found Eve at the last ebb of her indomitable strength; all her vitality sapped by a winter in which more than usual demands had been made upon her by her invalid mother.

After settling them both by the Cornish coast in June, I had the joy of seeing her colour and tone return.

Then, with characteristic cruelty, she drove me from her. "Had I nothing better to do than follow about a paralysed woman and her nurse? It must be boring to me, and certainly was to them. Surely Edward might find me some work, if the Army had no further use for me," and so on.

She carried her point, as she always did, and goaded me into a flight back to town.

My interest in Corner Street had certainly flagged, as all interests did when in the company of Eve. *She* saw to that. Then, rather meanly, she upbraided me for desertion of an old friend.

"Is it you who have chucked the O'Neills?" she asked. "Or have they turned you down?"

In vain I tried to explain to her that people like Barry—who have been made happy in the afternoon of life—scarcely want friends of the "old unhappy far-off days and battles long ago" turning up on their hands to remind them of the past!

. . . . . .

How long I should have delayed making this call on the O'Neills I know not. A mere accident again threw me into their arms.

It chanced that, on a hot afternoon in early July, I was paying a bill at Judson & Grady's, when my eye was caught by the Greek profile of a young man standing in the next department.

He was leaning against an alcove, his back towards me, deep in conversation with a girl, also practically hidden from view. In order to get a glimpse of the invisible She, who was clearly proving so attractive to this handsome youth, I wandered through the second doorway. Stepping behind a tall standard lamp, I caught a full view of the divinity.

Rich brown hair, a brilliant complexion, grey

eyes under drooping lids—where had I seen them before? Heavens! It was Phillida—and Dick!

Had it come to this?

I stepped forward and was gratified, in more ways than one, by the look of real pleasure that spread over Phillida's face as she exclaimed, "Colonel Carmichael! Oh, *how* pleased Barry will be! We were beginning to despair of you."

In Dick's demeanour a certain stiffness was apparent. "We thought the Riviera had swallowed you up," he said moodily, adding as an afterthought, "I suppose you meet all the swagger people out there?"

I laughed.

"I have been with a sick friend in Cornwall for nearly a month. A very pleasant change to be back in England again, I can tell you—when June, if not April, is here."

Finding they were not bound anywhere for tea, I would take no denial — they must come with me.

I suggested 'Saucers,' as it was within a walk.

The tea there would not compare with Mrs Ben's, I owned, but their strawberry ices were counted rather good. The heat outside, and a glance at Phillida decided me to call up a taxi, and before they had collected their thoughts, I was ushering them into the gay scene that Saucers presents on a summer's afternoon.

For a moment, Phillida looked a little taken aback at sight of the crowd, and I repented my choice.

But there was no turning back, and, in a moment, she was her benign self, leading the way with an air of unconcern, as though constantly in the habit of making her way through a fashionable mob of tea-drinkers.

I had impulsively fixed on Saucers with the boyish idea of giving myself the pleasure of treating Phillida and Dick to the best tea that London could offer. I felt, moreover, a foolish satisfaction in thinking that even at this favoured afternoon resort of gilded youth, it would be hard to find a couple of better mien than the two I had in tow.

An expert in the matter of women's garb, my eye had at once appraised the costly elegance of Phillida's cloak and scarf. Her general appearance had, in effect, a certain artistry from its very lack of fashion. Scarves were not worn that season, yet she certainly did not look dowdy in that dull blue scarf with its long fringes.

I recalled the impression her face had left on me at first sight. It had repelled me by its lack of softness. Now, she struck me as less radiant and glowing in good looks, but possessed of a more gracious personality.

There was the usual buzz . . . the customary

clatter and chatter that greets the ear on entering any such resort of the fashionable fair. A noisy familiarity, too, at certain tables that I thought must grate upon Phillida's fastidious ear. There was, further, the usual frank staring; not likely to commend itself to Lady Fane's granddaughter. The 'cameo' look I noted on her wedding day had taken possession of her face again. I felt I had chosen ill for my purpose. The place was too crowded at the moment for either talk or observation.

More than one party hailed me as I passed with my guests in search of seats—a table seemed out of the question.

"Jim!"

"I say, Colonel——"

"Where've you been in hiding, old chap?"

But I was not to be distracted from my job. My reason for entertaining Phillida was not merely the youthful enjoyment of giving a beautiful woman tea and ices, though I had the satisfaction of noticing that she looked distinguished, even among the cluster of young Mayfair beauties present that afternoon. My impulse had been to take this chance of watching the two young people together, and thus dispel a dread born at sight of Dick bending over the back of Phillida's seat at Judson & Grady's.

"If that boy of Esmé's has started philandering

round his young stepmother, it will be the deuce! Poor old Barry!—incurably blind as of yore. I must look into the matter," had been some of my thoughts.

I had acted upon them—and here we were.

Dick's sulkiness, which had subsided into indifference, now gave place to frank enjoyment of the scene before him.

"It must be topping coming here if you know people," he remarked to me, as we prepared to settle down at a table just vacated by a laughing trio of girls. One of them, a black-eyed beauty, was making a bold bid for Dick's notice.

His glance caught the challenge in the girl's eyes, and at the same time took in a pair of gloves lying on the deserted table.

He seized his opportunity. "Excuse me, but are these yours?"

At that moment the girl who had passed ahead of Black Eyes turned quickly round—

"Oh, thanks awfully, they're mine!" A fair face glowing with health presented itself to Dick. Light hazel eyes, clear as washed pebbles, looked straight into his. Her hair—a bunch of corn-coloured curls—was bobbed and in the latest mode.

Ruth Mainwaring, by Jove!

Having refused to be waylaid myself, I now

could not resist Eve's favourite niece and an unofficial godchild.

"It's Ruth—isn't it?" I struck in at Dick's elbow, smiling at the owner of the gloves.

She turned to me a rosy face, alight with surprise. Then recognising me, her eyes danced deliciously, and she made a mock bob.

"Sure! Your honour's humble servant!"

"Can't remember my name, of course?"

"Sure it was your honour's face that escaped me." Here the naughty child winked at me. I wondered whether Phillida had caught the wink and the words and was making a wrong note of them.

"Why haven't you been to see Eve?"

"I did, last week, and found her still away."

"Well, she's back now, so don't forget."

Here her black-eyed companion, unable to recapture Dick's attention, showed acute impatience, and I let Ruth go.

Before the costly tea and world-famed ices had been disposed of, I had successfully drawn my young guests into giving me an excellent account of themselves and their new craze. I listened with inward relief, though with some surprise, at the occupation which, they both explained to me, had taken the place of the endless house-hunting. The number of sale rooms and old curiosity shops they had attended together was stupendous.

According to Dick, he was getting quite an adept at bidding against 'the fellows in the trade.' More surprising still was it to hear that he had been busy putting up to auction all his father's stored furniture.

I remembered his remark about it at Christmas, but said nothing.

To the young people's delight, I proved to be as keen on Chippendale and Sheraton as they themselves could wish. I owned to having suffered from the same fever in my young days, and readily assented to come and appraise their latest purchase—a pewter tankard.

"Fah says you're quite an expert on old furniture, sir," remarked Dick, with becoming awe.

"Hardly," was my modest answer. "Dropped a tidy bit of money in the pursuit of 'the genuine,' that's all. It's a mania. For the moment one can't escape the pleasing plague."

By this time my fears were lulled to rest.

I noted with satisfaction that Dick was too busily occupied with the gay scene before him to spare a glance at Phillida. I also noted, with some complacency, that the eye of the great Kellerman had lighted on my fair guest.

The painter was seated at some distance from the table where I was entertaining the two. He was sipping rare China tea by himself, a habit of

his—and woe betide the friend who was tactless enough to accost him on these occasions! I became absorbed in watching his futile attempts to get a fuller view of Phillida's face, shadowed as it was by a large Leghorn hat—too artistic to be actually fashionable.

At length he rose, and made a bee-line for our table—much to my amusement. We were old friends; but I knew my man too well to show any sign of recognition till he touched me on the shoulder.

"Haven't seen anything of you for ages, old man! Not since we met on the Riviera in March. Where have you been hiding yourself?"

"Oh, in Cornwall, with friends."

A few more words, and Kellerman moved back to his seat, having swept more than one full glance over Phillida, and then a puzzled look at Dick, as though trying to recall something.

I refrained from introducing my party, but when the painter had returned to his table and had started upon a small sketch, I remarked, "That was Kellerman, the portrait painter."

Dick was all agog. "Why, he painted my mother!"

"Yes. What of that?"

"I should like to have been introduced to him."

"He would have liked to be introduced to *you*,"

said I, turning with a smile to Phillida. "But I fancied you would feel it was too hot to start small-talk with a lion of that sort, and you'd rather be getting home."

"You were quite right." She looked her gratitude. And my impression had once been that those grey eyes were too alert—too keenly observant—to express emotion! I had already found that on rare occasions they could so soften as to transform the expression of the whole face. They did so now, in a way that was most appealing.

"Come along, we'll get a taxi," I said hurriedly. "Barry will never forgive me if I make you late for dinner."

In the two minutes that Dick was getting a taxi, I found time to say to Phillida—

"Well, did you take my warning to heart about not spoiling that youngster?"

Eyes as grave and steady as a judge's met mine. "Yes, I did. And I do think Barry's mind is now quite at rest about him. This game of ours keeps him very much at home—too much so sometimes, I fear. A boy of his age wants companions."

Dick was back again with the taxi, but I had my answer as far as Phillida was concerned, and could console myself with, "Thank the Lord, no harm done to either—so far."

But while giving my directions to the driver,

I caught an expression on Dick's face as he stepped into the taxi beside Phillida that made me change my mind. The hand I had already raised for the parting salute called a halt.

"One moment, Mrs O'Neill. Do you think Barry will be in about ten to-night? I happen to be dining not far from Corner Street, and would like to look in for a chat and a smoke? Good! *Au revoir!*"

Here was my chance, at any rate, of seeing whether Barry appeared as entirely happy over his unequal marriage as when I saw him last, at Christmas.

CHAPTER XI.

I PUT MY FOOT IN IT.

THAT evening I was shown into the consulting-room by Mrs Ben. She informed me the doctor had only lately returned from a bad case, and was finishing a hurried meal on his return from work in order to join me immediately.

Passing the drawing-room door I caught the sound of Dick's clear tenor voice and the words—

"Oh let the solid ground not fail beneath my feet
Before my life has found what some have found so sweet!"

"That boy can sing," was my inward comment as I followed Mrs Ben. Then the song stopped abruptly, as though my arrival were responsible.

The door of the ante-room, which connected the drawing-room with the consulting-room, was open, and here, caught in a trap, the following conversation reached my ears :—

"Fah's lucky to have such a friend, that's what I think."

"He *is* nice," came in assent from Phillida. "He gives me the jolly feeling that only half of him has quite grown-up, and that one bit of him will always remain a boy. I think of him, somehow, as *years* younger than Fah."

"Do you?" said Dick, astounded. "He strikes me as a regular man of the world. Fah's a child compared to him! Why, he knows London society down to the ground. He's in everything—one can see that. He knew half those people at Saucers this afternoon."

"Yes, that's just it," Phillida answered. "He's an idle man. I always think of people who just live for society as rather like children. They're only playing at life, after all."

"I don't see it that way a bit," Dick spoke restively. "To me, they've got something worth living for—not merely grinding at work. Look at Fah! He's just wearing himself to death over a lot of wounded Tommies. I'm sorry for the poor chaps, of course, but he can't do much for them, and well——! There you are! Look at those jolly people at Saucers, this afternoon. They were out for a good time—and they got it."

"I'm not so sure of that. . . . Don't, Dick, you know how I hate being pawed. Go and fetch the tankard, and we'll clean it up to show the Colonel, when Fah's done with him."

"Righto. There! I've only kissed you on

the top of your head. You can't object to that!"

Here was I waiting, on tenterhooks, till Barry should break in, or I could safely announce myself, without dismaying the young people. They would both hate to be caught discussing their host of the afternoon.

Mercifully at that moment, Barry appeared.

The end of the conversation I had overheard stiffened in me a determination to say—what I had come to say.

After the first greeting and the usual exchange of ideas on party politics, we smoked in silence. I took some time to screw up courage to start upon the subject. Half my cigar was consumed ere I began—

"It was a happy accident my coming on your family this afternoon."

"I've been hearing what a good time you gave them at Saucers."

"*Au contraire*—you bet I enjoyed it more than they did."

"Rot! A blasé fellow like you!"

"My dear chap! it is not every day one has the luck to take someone like your wife out to tea. Kellerman was at Saucers and spotted her at once."

"Rot!" muttered Barry again, but he was not displeased.

"That boy Dick's growing up into a fine figure of a man, what?" I went on. "Ought to be taking up some game, though—golf, or something for his muscles."

"No time," muttered Barry.

"Well, if he's not careful, he'll grow up soft. It's pleasant, no doubt, dangling at your wife's apron strings" (I hoped that I had mixed the two phrases judiciously), "but he's not a child now!"

Barry began to jerk ominously in his chair.

"He always followed his own mother like a dog, and, since her death, Phillida's mothered him. She did so for two years before she married me. The boy is deuced lucky to have found such a . . . guardian angel in her."

"Yes—yes, indeed, as long as——"

Barry gave me no time to choose my words.

"Confound you, Jim, if you are again referring to the old affair. Do you suppose, even if my lips weren't sealed, that a girl like that could understand such a situation? Besides, she's a wife—it would be an insult to distrust. If you can't see for yourself what she is——" He stood up, working his feelings off upon his pipe, which he proceeded to rap unmercifully against the chimney corner in angry protest.

I rose also.

"If you think I'm such a blind ass as not to see that your wife is one in a thousand, you may

as well chuck me at once, Barry. Anyone can see she breathes a different air from us poor earthworms."

Barry's face cleared, and he ceased to torture his pipe. "Oh, as long as you can see that, old chap, it's all right, only—why, in God's name, rake up the past?"

"Sorry, my dear fellow, but putting the old affair aside, my point is that just because her soul can't reach down to the dust of the actual, it's difficult for her to help Dick, who has got to face the temptations of a world that's none too clean and select in these post-war days —but face it he must."

Barry's feelings jerked him into angry work upon his pipe again.

"Thank goodness we live outside this post-war society. I hate it. And I'll have none of it for Phillida—or Dick. Poor Esmé was a victim to the smart set of her day."

"It's the deuce!" was my inward comment. "To think that his faithfulness should take the form of blaming everyone but Esmé! And now, with this Quaker girl, he's for keeping her in a glass case—Dick, too, if he can squeeze him into one."

What I said was, "Well, my dear old chap, you know I don't believe in the possibility of keeping the tares from the wheat. To me this

world's 'the nurse of all we know, as well as the mother of all we feel.'"

I fell back upon the Bible and Shelley, with a grim sense of failure.

Barry muttered, "Damn," and then came to a full stop.

"Hang it all," I retorted, "let's stop this. I've only been a nuisance. You'll have to forgive me—calling you to account like this over your own affairs. I must be off now—may I say good night to the others, or have they gone to bed by now? I heard some music which my arrival seemed to interrupt."

"Come along—she and Dick practise singing together, every evening. Hope you approve of that, old chap?"

His laugh was kindly, if a little forced, and with his usual swiftness he threw open the drawing-room door. The sight that met his eyes must have recalled our talk, for it was undoubtedly in the light of my warning that Barry saw Phillida at that moment.

They were both sitting on the hearth-rug together, their latest plaything between them.

At our entry Phillida sprang up, and came towards us, bearing the pewter tankard aloft in triumph. Dick rose more leisurely, and followed her, his hands in his pockets.

Eager and intent on her trophy—it was not till

Phillida caught sight of her husband's face that her expression changed to one of alarm—she swayed and would have fallen with the tankard, but that Barry rushed forward, and, holding her with one arm, took the tankard from her with the other. He almost flung it at Dick.

"How *dare* you let her lift that heavy thing, you idiot!"

Standing at the door I saw it all. Dick nearly collided with me as he strode out of the room with the tragic trophy. I quickly closed the door, for I saw the colour returning to Phillida's face as Barry carried her to the sofa.

Slipping my arm into Dick's left, I dragged him into the doctor's room, saying below my breath, "It's not your fault, old man; take it easy." For I mistook his face, pale with anger, for one of anxiety.

I then rang the consulting-room bell, which brought Mrs Ben.

"Mrs O'Neill has had an attack of faintness," I explained. "The doctor is with her in the drawing-room. She's all right now. Please make my excuses."

"Faintness!" interrupted Mrs Ben sharply; then turning upon Dick, "What's she been doing? Not touching that 'eavy beer jug that you've taken such a silly fancy to. I'm ashamed to 'ave such a thing in the 'ouse."

"It's simply a fuss about nothing; Phee's all right; just tripped over the mat," said Dick aggressively. "She's as fit as a fiddle, really. A strong healthy girl! And he treats her as if she were his own age, and wanted mollycoddling."

"Fit! I should hope she is fit for what's before her. *I'm* seeing to that, though." She turned to me, her face ablaze. "When I try to tell this young gentleman why we need to take care of her just now, he only cheeks me and tells me he 'wasn't born yesterday'—so I thought he knew. . . . You'll excuse my speaking so free, sir, but gentlemen—old or young—are that senseless at times like these."

"I quite agree with you, Mrs Ben; but please remember that ladies are a bit senseless, too, and in this instance the blame lies with Mrs O'Neill, not this boy." I did not like Dick's expression, and my last remark had the desired effect.

He looked less like murdering Mrs Ben. . . .

A ring from the drawing-room bell at that moment sent the good woman flying; while Dick, his wrath having reached bursting point, exclaimed, "I've done with Fah! I can never forgive him this. He ought to have told me."

"Steady, you duffer; don't judge hastily. It may have been your . . . stepmother's wish that nothing should be said about it till——"

"Well, I'm not going to stand it any longer—

getting blamed for everything—and now *this*. I knew nothing at all about it—I feel like doing something desperate, it's all so *unfair* on me," pursued the boy.

I now began to see that the outburst was not what I had imagined it to be—the inevitable anger of a man when he's frightened. Dick's thoughts were patently concentrated not upon Phillida but himself.

"Well, my boy," I reiterated, "don't make a fool of yourself, that's all."

"I feel like chucking them all—and myself, too, for the matter of that," his wrath cooling down again to sullenness.

"Like cutting your throat, of course?" I said imperturbably, eyeing the boy. "*I* know the feeling. We all go through the same when we let ourselves in for something—fall in love with the wrong girl, or get run in for helping a friend. Well, man—swallow it down."

"It's no go. I'm off, anyway; I'm not going to stick it here."

"Don't be an ass, especially as you're not to blame. Come along to my Club and have a whisky-and-soda with me there. We can't be any use here, either of us."

I saw the boy was trying to make a bolt of it.

He hesitated.

"Come along!" I laid a compelling hand on

his arm, and we went out together—Dick, outwardly haughty, inwardly humbled, and not a little comforted, I could see (as well as flattered), by my offer of a drink and the words of absolution that accompanied it. Little did he dream that the man at his side, whom he took for an indifferent old dug-out, if not a self-assured man of the world, was inwardly cursing himself for a blundering fool, and wondering how far his words of warning had been responsible for the evening's fiasco.

CHAPTER XII.

EVE HELPS ME OUT.

I dragged Dick along with me, not to the Club, however, but, despite all etiquette and the hour, to Boyton Gardens and to Eve.

I found her on the steps of No. 12, dismissing Ruth with a kiss to her home at the farther end of Hardestone Square. The child had evidently lost no time since our encounter at Saucers, in looking up her aunt.

It was with the nonchalant nod of the modern girl that she signified her recognition of the stranger who had retrieved her gloves that afternoon.

"I see you have managed to hang on to them this time," was Dick's comment, eyeing the gloves and their owner with a fatuous air of satisfaction.

Phillida was certainly forgotten for the moment!

Leaving these two children on the doorstep—

they seemed particularly pleased with one another and quite at their ease,—I drew Eve indoors to tell my tale and make my appeal.

Would she put Dick up for the night, and secure immediate peace and quiet to the Corner Street household, also allow me to 'phone through to this effect?

Would she? No! She merely treated my suggestion with contumely, scoffing at my fears, one and all, scoffing still more at Phillida's stupidity.

In the end, however, she proposed ringing up the Bens herself to ascertain the latest news of the 'fainting lady,' as she contemptuously styled Barry's wife.

Her telephone inquiry had the happy result of making her change her mind. But she was pleased to be uncommunicative anent the conversation she had had with Corner Street. Just in order to aggravate me, I knew. I threatened to get my own news for myself, which brought her, at length, to reason. . . .

"Can't you be patient for a moment? When you ask so many questions in one breath, how on earth can I provide replies to all of them at once. Who answered my call? Why, an excellent woman—your 'Mrs Ben,' I suppose. It's lucky that poor feeble creature has someone like her to lean upon."

"Do you mean Barry's wife? Feeble creature, indeed! You should just see her!"

"She's pretty, that much is evident. Yes, the housekeeper said she was better and her husband less anxious since Dr Trueman had called. You certainly did the right thing in bringing the boy here, though you seem to have been in a particularly idiotic frame of mind before that brilliant idea struck you. As if every boy worth his salt wouldn't get soft over any young woman of that type who condescended to mother him! He must make a start sometime in the business of falling in love. Ruth will absorb his energies in that direction for a bit, no doubt. You've certainly scored in this last attempt of yours to shield your precious Barry. By the way, I sent the boy's love—without his leave—to the lady and his respects to his father to calm them both over his sudden departure. So you must give me credit for that much presence of mind!"

After Ruth had been again dismissed homeward—this time with Dick in attendance,—after the boy himself had been stowed away in the guest chamber that was to have been his room, Eve settled me down with a cigar. She then asked for a full report of the whole affair. After that we deserted the O'Neills, and talked about nothing in particular till close on midnight, when she crept up to her invalid and I walked back to

the Club—once again blind and deaf to the sights and sounds of Piccadilly, no longer haunted by the skeleton in Barry's cupboard, being too pleasantly concerned with my own affairs.

It was many a long day since Eve had treated me to one of her gracious moods, and I racked my brains for the cause of her condescension. Women are bewildering at the best of times, and certainly Eve, at all times and in all circumstances, has always contrived to be the most unaccountable of her sex.

Did that account for her superlative charm ?

I fell asleep considering the matter.

CHAPTER XIII.

I MAKE INQUIRIES AT CORNER STREET.

NEXT day I called at Corner Street and encountered Ben's brick-like face, which assumed a somewhat deeper shade of red when I made my inquiries. He answered them in his best official manner.

"My lady is going on as well as could be expected, sir, but Dr Trueman 'as recommended moving her to the sea—she 'ad a bit of a shock." He then added in a lower and more confidential tone, "The doctor and Elizabeth's motored down with her to Seastone this morning."

"For how long?"

The official manner came back in full force.

"That I can't tell you, sir, but if you should find it convenient to call to-morrow, my wife will be back by then"—here the confidential manner again—"to arrange about a nurse for my lady." Lastly came a sepulchral whisper: "Thing's hasn't worked out quite according to

plan, but Elizabeth 'll be able to tell you about it better nor me."

He coughed violently; then, resuming his solemn quarter-deck tones so ill-suited to confidences, he boomed the inquiry, "You'll excuse me, sir, but should I expect Master Dick back to-night?"

"Certainly, under these circumstances. It was only because he was so rattled that I carried him off to keep him out of harm's way."

"We quite understood, sir"—the sepulchral whisper again,—"and me and Elizabeth was deeply obliged accordingly, let alone the doctor. . . ."

Dick's feelings when he heard of the sudden exodus from Corner Street were very mixed.

I imagined from his air that they must have contained some grains of relief. He was, moreover, once again cock of the walk.

I could now safely give the boy a piece of my mind, as he had entirely recovered from his mood of last night. Far from any desire to bring his existence to a speedy end he appeared more than usually pleased with himself that morning.

After accepting my strictures on his conduct to Barry with a good grace, he resigned himself, rather cheerfully, to his fate, I thought; Mrs Ben's cooking must have made it a very pleasant one.

I found later on that he consoled himself, pretty frequently, for his lonely evenings by after-dinner calls at Boyton Gardens. Whether he went by way of Hardestone Square or happed on Ruth when supping with her aunt, I know not. If Eve knew, she did not enlighten me.

It was evident at all events that the boy was not moping badly for want of Phillida's company. Barry, it appeared, spent his time speeding to and fro between his work and his wife. The boy's wrath with his father seemed to have died a natural death. I gave Eve credit for having assisted at the funeral.

If she chose to be silent—which she did—about Dick's progress with his new friends, I could be equally reticent over my interview with Mrs Ben. She answered the door when I called, as arranged, the day after, and gave me all the information I so sorely needed.

There had been no harm done, Dr Trueman considered—"'Spite of 'er lifting that 'orrible beer jug. . . . 'Ben,' 'e says, 'Praise be!' when 'e heard it hadn't upset nothink, only 'er nerves, it seems."

Dr Trueman had not only advised her getting away at once, but recommended some particularly favourable quarters, personally known to him at Seastone.

Mrs Ben kept me to tea, and when Dick did

not turn up, the good woman asked me if I would allow her to show me the house.

"I feel when the 'appy event, sir, is over, as how the doctor 'll be wanting to get into an 'ome of 'is own. It was just this prospect made him put aside the idea of fixing on one, judgin' the business would 'ave been too much for my lady *this* year."

(I might have guessed it was no thought of his own comfort that kept Barry in Corner Street !)

"It was just to give her a distraction, as you might say, that he encouraged that there childish playing with queer, old-fashioned, useless stuff out o' pawn-shops. Them second-'ands is little better than uncles, sir, and some of the things they buys in them is that dirty, they'd encourage a fever. But there, sir, there's a risk in every-think——"

"There is, indeed," I assented heartily, like a burnt child.

"When you come to think of it, sir," Mrs Ben continued, "even dying's risky, so it's best not to think about it. As Ben says, this fancy shopping's some sort of an 'obby for my lady in 'er interestin' state, though I've always 'eld with plain sewin' myself—cleaner work than the ransackin' of old jumbles. Still it 'ad its uses for Master Dick, I'll allow—though often I've grumbled over it."

"It's harmless enough," I said, smiling.

"That's just 'ow Ben looked at it, sir. 'It might be worse,' 'e says. Maybe this ferretin' for furniture 'ull use up the taste 'e's got for 'ole and corner work."

"A safe channel for misplaced energy," I suggested.

"That'll be the medical name for it, no doubt, sir. I never could keep sich names as that in my 'ead. . . . If Miss Phillida weren't what she is I'd often 'ave been in a quake that Master Dick 'ud be teaching her his slyness . . . but she walks too straight to be led aside by crooked folk, though she mightn't guess what they're after." Here she paused for breath.

"As far as Master Dick is concerned," I said in the interval, "he's far too young to have any influence over her." I was determined to trample on this mare's nest of my own making.

"That's what Ben sez, sez 'e, 'the boy's green to the world hisself.' 'That may be,' sez I, 'but if 'e's green 'e's foxy.' I hope, sir, when the time comes, as you'll use your influence—seein' the doctor sets such store by you—to get Master Dick settled on his own account. 'E'd not easily put up with a baby, seein' he's had the march of everything—the doctor, my lady, and the rest of us."

By this time Mrs Ben had got me to the top

floor of the house—Dick's domain. When I saw the room, a large bright attic with a fine view of two squares, I was not surprised that the boy had been dissatisfied with the usual post-war quarters of a young clerk.

"This was 'is room, sir, whenever 'e got leave from that there training camp he was in while the war was on, and I went out o' my way more'n once to give it to 'im when the 'ouse was full o' Doctor Dane's military patients."

Entering Dick's room I had wandered first to the window, then turning back, was caught by a picture over the mantelshelf.

The old wedding group in a handsome frame!

"My lady done that at Christmas," exclaimed Mrs Ben, *sotto voce*, a strange blend of fear and apology in her tone. From the way she eyed me, I feared my face must have given me away somewhat; a prick of the old pain that the sight of that group would never fail to bring.

"She 'ad it framed, unbeknowst, to please Master Dick." Then pointing to Frank's figure, she added in a slow way, strangely unlike her usual frank, brisk manner, "The first time my lady see'd Master Dick, she noticed a strange kind of likeness atween 'im and the Major. Never thinking of any cousinship, she took it as chanst—a guiding, she called it." Mrs Ben deliberately stopped, and a silence fell between us.

"I did not know that the Greenfields family were acquainted with Major Gordon," I said, carefully picking my words.

"Only one summer 'e came—the Major—when Miss Phillida was seventeen. Very fine gentleman he was too—Master Dick 'as some of his style, but the old master 'e never knew as the Major were any ways related not to say connected with Miss Dundarran—and never could he 'ave thought that his precious lamb 'ud be to marry one that 'ad once been 'usband to such as 'er. *I* never know'd it myself—not till that phottygraph come to life."

"But why not?" I asked aghast. "What do you know against the doctor's first wife?"

Mrs Ben actually paused in a manner quite unlike herself.

"Well, sir," she said, at last, deliberately, "the past is past—she's dead, my old master and missus be dead, let alone the young master—Miss Phillida's father—the captain that was. It wouldn't be becomin' of me—and it's strange how Providence acts upside down sometimes. But since ever I knew the truth, I've thanked the Lord for that Major Gordon never come no more to Greenfields, and got killed in the war—though it near broke my lamb's heart."

A light, a blasting light, struck upon me. The expression of my face evidently arrested the good woman in her talk.

"They wasn't engaged, sir, but 'ad the General knowed the family 'e sprung from——"

I was busy with my own thoughts. Surely Philip Fane could never have spoken to his father of the events of that tragic summer at Komankotal.

"'Er grandad 'ad rather 'ave seen 'er in 'er coffin first," I found Mrs Ben saying, quietly and deliberately, her blue eyes looking straight into mine as though in search of the silent tragedy that lay sheltering behind them.

"The doctor's having married the dear lamb's another matter," she said in apology, as though to comfort me, as well as herself, for the hostile fate that had linked the past with the present so mercilessly. "'E'd likely have been innocent enough 'isself."

Innocent indeed, God knows! thought I.

"And it wasn't till that there old picsher got resurrected that I knowed where Master Dick hailed from; but I'd always 'ad a kind of scunner of the boy, as you might say."

I stood dumb and dismayed. Where was this to end? To think that I had counselled Barry to give Phillida the facts. And now I saw them hydra-headed!

"You haven't talked to the doctor about—this?" I stuttered at length, indicating the group.

"Not me, sir. The poor jontleman! 'E's

troubles enough without that, and, like enough, 'e knowed no more of his first wife than some other folks did, that set store by her."

(Ah, indeed!)

"I mean . . . I should not speak to the doctor," I said lamely. "Or Master Dick . . . about Major Gordon's attachment—it was not an engagement you say to—your lady."

(Phillida's heightened colour, and the suggestion of a sacred sorrow in her look, when she spoke of Frank on her wedding day, came back upon me with a flood of remembrance.)

"It so happened," I went on after a pause, "that he and the doctor were not exactly good friends—through no fault of the doctor's," I added hastily.

"You don't need to tell me that, sir, but I never 'ave said not one word to him, though I might—seein' as I knew'd nothink myself—not till Christmas—as to 'is first wife's folk—nor cared neither—little guessing. I did say Miss Phillida 'ad admirers—that was only proper, when the doctor began to show 'is feelings, but I named no names. I knew better nor that; it wouldn't 'ave been becoming in me, sir. But I'd better own to you, that when Master Dick was so boastful and cockahoop about that silly picsher at Christmas, and one day started a-singing of his mother's praises, and the 'andsome

look of 'er cousin there, it was more'n I could stand! I kep' silence about his *mother*, though my tongue fair burnt in my mouth—like King David's. But when 'e starts swaggerin' about the Castle, that someone told him that there cousin of 'is belonged to—my temper got the better o' me. 'Oh, don't you talk to me of Major Gordon,' I sez; 'I knowed more of him than you can, seein' as 'ow he was a-courtin' Miss Phillida when you was in the nursery.'"

I groaned.

"I shouldn't a-done it, I know, sir, and Ben 'e says my tongue 'll lead me into danger some day if I don't look after it, the same as 'e does 'is. But it was out of my mouth before I could lay hold on it with my back teeth, and I'm afraid Master Dick 'll make some mischief out o' my words—being' like 'is mother."

I wheeled round upon her. "What do you know about his mother?" I asked peremptorily.

She stood to her guns. "I'd rather not say, sir. She's dead, and Master Philip's dead, and that's all there is to it to-day. No one can 'arm 'im now—'e's at rest—a soldier's grave, as you might say. But 'is mother, and the old master—well, it killed 'em alive, in a manner of speakin'. Even Miss Phillida couldn't bury the sorrow for them. Well there! I feel better now I've told

you, sir. Only to think I was so crack-brained as to let out sich things to Master Dick!"

"But—Phillida—herself? She knows nothing?"

"Not she—I've never let on to her what I said—not me—the lamb!"

A noise below made us both start, guiltily—standing, as we were, before the picture that had so balefully brought to light events in the past—now happily buried, or so we imagined.

Mrs Ben and I hurried down to find Dick had just arrived.

"I've come to carry you off to dine with me," I explained.

He was becoming grateful, as usual.

Mrs Ben's eyes met mine—it was enough! Her gratitude was visible in them. . . . She could dispense with words when she willed.

I left Corner Street, my mind filled with a sense of dismay, not so much from anything she had actually said as from what she had left unsaid.

Dick must have found me an absent-minded host that night, for my thoughts were haunted by the strange fatality which had saved Phillida from a marriage with Frank—her ignorance of the real man being evidently as colossal as Barry's had been of the real woman on the day of his marriage with Esmé!

And now?

I questioned whether Barry and Phillida's knowledge of each other amounted, at this moment, to more. But in their case there was surely little to fear. Each knew less than nought of the other's past, it is true. But, here in the case of these two, one could count on foundations secure from any fatal personal discoveries which might mar the after happiness of a hasty marriage. With the double possession of integrity of mind and clean living, surely—though future storms might assail such a home as theirs—it could be trusted to stand.

Yet there remained the skeleton in Barry's cupboard, unknown to Phillida, and *her* early love affair with Frank—unknown to *him!*

These hidden facts seemed fraught with darkness and danger. Had the former things been revealed, each to the other, by the blessed light of day, they would have been transformed into the commonplace. As it was, the more I thought of them the more I dreaded a chance discovery of these tragedies on the one side or the other.

Then, into the midst of these forebodings regarding Barry and his future, came August; and, with it, Edward from Aix to claim me over the usual business of preparing for his autumn guests at Haddons.

CHAPTER XIV.

MICHAEL ARRIVES WITH THE DAWN.

EDWARD'S shooting is one of the finest in far Lochaber. In consequence, he has always been able to muster some of the best guns; guns, too, of more than one sort. For, in the political, no less than the social world, an invitation to Haddens had, I knew, come to be one of the things worth angling for.

So, from the twelfth onwards, we spent our days with great satisfaction upon the moors, our evenings in the billiard-room. Those who did not play billiards, played bridge, and those who could not afford cards, indulged in some futile game—devised to assist flirting, if not match-making.

We filled in the spare moments from this active business of life in sampling the skill of Edward's chef, and in sampling his port while we set in order the affairs of Europe, solved the domestic difficulties of our friends, discussed the

black sheep in our neighbours' families, and the notabilities in our own.

Above all we listened—more or less convinced and altogether charmed—while Lady Dorinda, our bright particular star, kindly initiated us in turn into the secret of her invariable success with her dinner-parties and her dances, her servants and her charities; even with the boom in her investments. One of her so-called friends unkindly declared that this all-conquering widow even held herself responsible for the success with which her husband had met his death at Ypres, leading his men to victory!

Then, on the 24th of September, into the midst of this work of 'polished idleness' came a letter from Barry, written at Seastone—a mere line.

I shook myself free of Haddons within a few hours, and was sitting beside him in the dining-room of his seaside lodging the following evening.

"You *are* a good fellow—but I never meant you to bolt like that," was Barry's greeting. "I suppose I oughtn't to have let you know——"

"I'd have had a serious quarrel with you if you hadn't. How is she? Quite recovered since I saw her in town?"

"Oh, Lord, yes! She's been first-rate"—Barry never allowed anyone to look back on past mistakes,—"she hasn't turned a hair. We have had Matty for most of her holidays, and

Dick for the first week of his. He spent the second in Cornwall—thanks to some kind friends of yours. You've done him a lot of good, old chap."

"Heavens, he's growing up, that's all! Well—when do you expect the event to come off?"

"I expected it would have been over before you arrived. But I am afraid she's going to have a bad time—and—and—she won't let them help her with so much as a whiff. Trueman turned up this morning—the nurse came two days ago. Elizabeth's here, too, thank God! They've turned me out of the room now—they think I'm rattled. Perhaps I am—but I felt as if I might have been able to help by—just being there."

"I expect she'd rather you weren't there, to see her suffer," I hazarded.

"My dear chap, she's not thinking of *me*. Her whole soul is taken up with the thought of the child."

As if fearing his remark might have left room for criticism, he added: "She has the true mother instinct—has had it all these weeks."

"Since she lifted the tankard!" I inwardly exclaimed. "The silly girl."

"It is good to see you," Barry went on rather absently, his mind intent on every sound from the room above. "It's made me haver on about my family affairs—just because I know it doesn't bore you, that's the mischief of it!"

He stopped, for there came the rush of hurrying feet above our heads, and then what sounded like a groan.

Barry wilted and subsided into silence.

So we waited on into the small hours. Then he started pacing the room, and kept it up for nearly half an hour, till it got on my nerves. I drew him to the window, pulled up the blind, and thus we stood, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for the coming dawn and what it was to bring.

On the African veldt . . . among the hills of India . . . in Flander's trenches . . . I have watched many a sunrise, with more than one good comrade, and I can recall the quickening sensation experienced, again and again, at dawn of day. It might be merely the comfortable sense of being alive in a good old world; or the refreshing sense of drinking from a sparkling cup a draught of early morning air; or again it might be the breathless sense of waiting till a growing riot of colour upon the sky-line burst into a blinding blaze of light.

More than one such sunrise has left its mark upon my memory. But in this September dawn there lay something more than a mere matter of memory. This, and another—the dreaded dawn at Santa Margherita,—after Barry's fight for Esmé's honour. Then had the sight of the sunrise struck deeper. . . . And now again, when,

under happier auspices, along the sky-line stole the first glimmer of dawn, I felt moved anew by the miserable sense of my own unworthiness. And just as ten years ago it was not the radiance of an Italian sunrise that was responsible for haunting my soul with the ghost of undone duties, so now it was not the white cliffs of England seen in the light of early dawn that struck upon my inward eye. It was this man who on both occasions had watched with me through a night of suspense and anguish, wrapped in a silence more potent than the silence of coming dawn; silence, that was eloquent of strength, put to shame the cowardice of my own thoughts. Those black thoughts that strangle and stifle the inner core of one's being, till one comes to doubt the existence of one's own soul. It is Barry, and such as he, who reveal to us the soul of goodness in things evil. Looking at the face of the man beside me, I thought of his blind sacrifice to Esmé in youth; his vain fight for her honour in the prime of life. And then I thought of Phillida with her pure and noble heritage. I had deplored this marriage on the score of the old enmity between Frank and Barry. But how far worse a *mésalliance* would have been perpetrated by a marriage between Frank and Phillida!

And here again Barry had stepped in, as it

were, to save the Fane family from the doom of the Dundarrans. But for him Phillida might even now be wasting her life worshipping the memory of a worthless man.

Suddenly across such thoughts as these flashed the first light of dawn—like an arrow along the horizon—a piercing ray! At the same moment came a faint cry that broke, thin and clear, upon the still house.

Why at such a moment as this should Horace, the guttersnipe of the wedding day, trip up my memory? Of all tiresome and untoward incidents! I turned to Barry. The expression on his face made me grip him by the arm. Reacting rapidly from the exalted mood into which this man had lifted me, I feverishly scanned the contents of this wretched furnished apartment—its vases, its wool mats, its marble-topped tables, till my eye lit on the sideboard where Mrs Ben, with her usual forethought, had set out decanter and glasses. Mechanically I put some raw whisky into a tumbler, muttering, "Drink that."

The next moment Mrs Ben's head appeared round the corner—crimson, triumphant! "Excuse me, sir, but Master Michael 'as arrived—my lady couldn't be better."

Then in a confidential whisper: "'E's 'ungry, sir, the very best sign, they say."

With this she vanished.

I believe I thumped Barry on the back; I may even have hugged him. I am quite oblivious as to what we did or said, but it is certain we were very foolish.

I have a confused recollection of a Harley Street specialist who congratulated Barry and made medical remarks; later, of the strange face of an immaculate nurse smiling fatuously and prating platitudes. Lastly, of Mrs Ben grasping my hand with a force that hurt. She, it would seem, had been struck dumb by sheer gladness of heart. Then we crept to bed like schoolboys caught out of bounds. Women certainly score over us on these occasions.

I fled next day, shamefaced, from a household that had no further use for me. I went down to Cornwall and to Eve—quite elated when I got away with my news. She scorned me as though I had announced the arrival of a belated parcel in the post. "Oh, well, *that's* all right. I suppose we shall have some peace now this tiresome baby has arrived. I am sure Barry himself can hardly have been more proud over it than you seem to be. It's very clear he has asked you to be a godfather again."

CHAPTER XV.

I AM OFFERED A JOB.

EDWARD so far forgave me my flight from Haddons as to claim me for a prolonged visit. This time at his villa near Hyères. Then, soon after Christmas, came—for me—a very flattering offer, wholly unexpected, from the 'Daily Surprise' to act as a military correspondent in the Rubalmanian regions where trouble was brewing.

I was more pleased than I chose to acknowledge, especially as Edward was all for persuading me to refuse the job.

"It's merely a complimentary affair—that's evident; Dacre's at the back of it, I'm sure. It's the least he could do after my favouring him over that loan. . . . Still it's decent of him and gracefully done. Not too obvious."

This was, of course, to take down any elation I might be feeling over the fact that the offer had been an entirely unsolicited one. It sprang, I had reason to know, as the direct outcome

of some chance articles I had sent to the Editor on the political aspect of border operations near the Russian frontier.

"And, anyway, surely you have had campaigning enough in your lifetime," Edward went on, "for, of course, it's your military experience—not your literary ventures—that are responsible for this, and seeing they have had so many officers of your standing to pick and choose from nowadays, you need have no compunction in refusing."

This was shifting his ground, and I seized the opportunity to end the discussion by declaring that I was bored stiff by idleness, and thankful to have a job again, and should have accepted any work that came to my hand. This was likely to be something lively and more in my line.

Such an ultimatum from me had the effect of making Edward sulk; and I left the next day before he had regained his temper.

When I reached town and had collected my kit I rang up Barry, and finding that he and the family—including the Bens—had run down to Seastone *en bloc* for Christmas, I repaired first to Eve with my news.

Her reception of it was nearly as damping to my ardour as Edward's had been to my vanity. She punctuated her remarks as to the dis-

advantages of thus returning to the old game of war with fewer caustic remarks than usual, but her lack of appreciation of the literary aspect of it disappointed and annoyed me. It ill became one who had thrown my lack of employment, rather cruelly, in my face more than once, to carp over this choice morsel which had so unexpectedly fallen to me.

"What does your precious Barry think about it?" she asked, after I had fired her objections.

"I have not told Barry yet," I answered.

"Oh! I am favoured," she said, not unkindly. "I thought the great Barry would have been accorded, as usual, the first consultation."

"But I've consulted no one; I have seen the editor and placed my services at the disposal of the 'Daily Surprise.' You can't expect an old dug-out like me not to be pleased over this compliment—to my pen——"

"To your sword, you mean?" She was as captious as Edward! "We shall hear of you leading the Rubalmanian forces next! I do hope Barry will put down his foot. It is a mad scheme at your age——"

"Nonsense! It is a most suitable job for an old campaigner—a mere kick-up—and the papers want a little window-dressing to keep the politicians keen. It's nothing to do with Barry or

anyone else—I'm a free agent, and glad to earn an honest penny——"

"Your friends, of course, don't count?"

"My friends will no longer be able to throw my idleness in my face——"

"Nonsense, Jim, that was merely—pulling your leg—it's irresistible!"

"Thank you, madam!" I commented, and refused to come down from my high horse, though the softness of her mood—phenomenal in Eve—was nearly my undoing. . . .

To change the subject, I asked on the door-step, "What of Dick?"

"Oh, he's coming on nicely—learning to dance—he sings rather well, and is in great request. He has now found someone besides Phillida to play his accompaniments. Aren't you going to look him up before you go? Don't forget in your excitement over the new baby that Dick's your godson . . ."

"I am going down to Seastone, and, I suppose, I shall see him there."

"Oh—you are seeing Barry then." She seemed wavering between her usual childish pose of jealousy and a genuine sense of relief. "He is the man to make you see common-sense—if anyone can."

Then, having reached the final step, I flung the question, "What of Ruth?"

"Oh, she's going in for the stage—haven't you heard?"

"What! That child. . . . Nonsense, you can't countenance such folly!"

"Well . . . her mother's death makes it necessary for her to do something."

"Her mother's death——?"

"Yes—didn't you see it?"

"No, of course not, or I should have written. You, at least, might have told me. Ruth's quite like a godchild to me—and I am twice as interested in her as I am in Dick. Besides Dick, whom you are always throwing at my head, has got a father—and a wealthy mother——"

"Only a step one," broke in Eve, "and now that wretched baby has put his nose out of joint. So her money's no use to him——"

"He's better without it, and there ought to be something of Esmé's. Dick's life is too easy for such a youngster if he's to stand upon his own feet. Eve, you've got to let me help finance the training of Ruth—as a private secretary. I want one . . ."

"What! Out in Rubalmania?"

"No!—but I shall be back in six months. I shall want a secretary—as soon as the girl's trained. For heaven's sake, don't let her take up with the stage—and that crowd. She's a mere child still!" I felt quite rabid, and was for retracing my steps

into the house. Eve actually held me back—a new and not unpleasant sensation.

"Now you've got your answer as to why I did not write to you in October, when Alice died. I knew what it would be—you'd want to put your hand into your pocket. No, thank you, my friend."

Her eyes were brighter than usual. With anyone but Eve, I should have suspected unshed tears.

"Ruth, like me," she went on, "would rather stand upon her own feet. It would spoil for her a very happy—unfettered relationship. You would sink to the deadness of a guardian of some sort. Girls don't put up with them these days. They kill 'em or banish them instead of marrying them. Besides, it would deprive her life, mine too—though that doesn't count—of the sauce—the spice—that makes your smart friendship such a relish to us poor—frumps. . . ."

"Eve! As usual, you're simply throwing stones at me!"

"It's my last chance, now you're deserting us all. No, Jim, I'm not jeering. If you don't understand, you're a greater dullard than I ever took you for. . . ."

And looking into her eyes, alight with pride, sparkling as only Eve's eyes can sparkle, I *did*

understand this relish she found in our friendship. Money had no part in it, nor sentiment either. She owed me nothing—she had seen to that.

She merely enjoyed, as she said, pulling my leg—that was all.

CHAPTER XVI.

I BID FRIENDS FAREWELL.

It was a strange Barry who met me at Seastone Station in answer to my wire.

I realised then that I had never seen this man really happy before. He had a new aura. Something that spelt fatherly pride, supreme content, and a few other things hitherto entirely alien to Barry's life and personality. If less inspiring, it was remarkably becoming to one of his soaring nature. I had often wondered whether his soul could be caught and caged within the walls of domestic life without the sense of a beating of wings.

He began upon politics, as usual, but I noticed he was not attending to my answers. I then realised that he was trying not to talk about the baby, or Michael, as I found they already called it.

"Why Michael?" I asked.

"Oh, his first name is Philip, after his mother and grandfather. *I* chose that. Michael is his

second name. That was Phillida's choice. It's an allusion to the war—as well as to . . . an angel. (Not to yourself. You mustn't make that mistake.) But it seemed suitably Irish for an O'Neill, what ? "

" Entirely apposite," I said, " the epitome of the Irishman's spiritual instinct for fighting."

" Who is he like ? " I next asked in self-defence. I knew, from bitter experience, of the ordeal of being presented to the son and heir. It is an excruciating exercise in the art of not saying the wrong thing.

" You wait and see," said Barry, beaming. " There is no mistaking who Michael is like."

My heart sank. I had played this game before, most unsuccessfully, when presented to something more like a sucking-pig than anything else, and discovered that the answer I was expected to make amounted to, " The living image of his great-uncle, the Judge ! "

I am not averse to children, but the genus infant, frankly, fills me with nervous dread. I have never yet fathomed why their clothes should be such a glaring misfit. I have suffered positive agonies when some officious female—generally a maiden aunt—has suggested that I should be allowed to handle my own godson !

Godsons have been rather liberally bestowed upon me by various appreciative friends. I have

no objection to choosing mugs and spoons for these hallowed children, but the honour of being allowed to hold the infants themselves has always proved too much for me. I am straightway seized with dread lest this writhing entity in my arms, tangled in its mass of misfits, should make the supreme effort—leap from its alien host to the floor, leaving me with the draperies.

As Barry would not talk of his baby, and obviously could talk of nothing else, I began on my own affairs. After teasing him a bit, by making him guess my news, I informed him of my literary billet.

"Can't you see me posing as a blooming pressman? I thought you'd have guessed from the new cut of my tie. I am definitely engaged to the 'Daily Surprise,' actually on the staff, and off on Thursday to Rubalmania."

"You were so beastly mysterious about it that I thought you must have contracted—another kind of engagement," Barry remarked drearily. "This one's a bit of a bombshell, as it is! How are we all going to get on without you? They may keep you out there for years."

His reception of my news was almost as damping to my spirits as Eve's and Edward's had been, and he seemed as blind as they were to the literary compliment it contained; but in his case my disappointment was tempered by his grudge at

my departure. Never given to the sentimental side of things, this tribute to his desire of me touched me profoundly, seeing that he now possessed both a wife and a babe to fill his world.

In the porch we found Phillida. On seeing her I forgot to think about the dreaded baby.

If Barry exhaled happiness, Phillida herself was transfigured by motherhood. Her beauty had acquired that touch of tenderness lacking to it hitherto. That a face—once self-contained and reserved to the extent of hardness—should now quiver with feeling gave me almost a pang. Her hand was raised, clearly to warn us to step softly; her eyes met mine in a silent greeting that held the warmth and sincerity of a man's hand grasp, then fell wholly absorbed in contemplating the sleeping form on her knee—a small bundle covered not by the conventional white shawl, but by some soft wrap of Oriental colouring.

The glory of her copper-brown hair, her dazzling complexion, the droop of her grey eyes—white-lidded and black-lashed—all combined to make a radiant picture of motherhood. When she drew the cloud aside, I saw, not the expected sight of a sucking-pig swathed in endless snowy garments, but a vision of infant beauty in a simple blue smock, lying with outstretched limbs in the abandonment of sleep.

The head slightly flung back, giving the full view of a flower face; rose-petalled skin; a tangle of curly dark hair, like his father's; long black eyelashes, like his mother's. Suddenly, as though in answer to a mute appeal from his proud parents, he slowly opened his eyes, to show me the rare shade of violet-blue which belonged to his grandfather. Then the owner of the eyes decided again on sleep, and I heard Barry's whispered "Well?" in my ears.

This time there was no difficulty in my answer. "Yes, he's Philip right enough."

"You could see that." Phillida's gaze rested upon me, like a benediction.

As I straightened myself and turned to Barry, I saw his face aglow with delight at my perception, equally pleased by my evident admiration of this perfect possession of his.

Certainly at this moment I felt Barry was favoured of the gods. That he, who looked upon children with a medical, if not a tolerant, eye, whose knowledge of the artistic side of things was altogether elementary, should become the owner of this idyllic impersonation of infant loveliness, seemed excessive—a want of foresight, on the part of Providence, not over-lavish of his gifts.

When, after lunch, I confided my former experiences in regard to babes brought for inspection, Phillida bubbled over with mirth.

"They showed you infants of three weeks old," she chuckled. "Michael's nearly five months, so he's left off looking like a beefsteak — the darling!"

I had still to see Elizabeth—as Phillida begged me to call Mrs Ben in future.

"She has attached you as part of the family, so you must act up to it. We shall never be forgiven if we don't let her have a 'crack' with you. She's been in quite a state of excitement ever since your wire came."

I assured her I was longing to see Mrs Ben's smiling countenance before I left.

". . . If you're not afraid of inspecting Michael again. But I warn you she's far prouder of him than I am, and will expect you to admire his toes as well as his clothes."

"You'd better not run up against Mrs Meadstone," Barry put in, "if you can help it. There's no love lost between those two."

"Mrs Meadstone's our landlady," Phillida explained, "and by a most extraordinary coincidence turns out to be the widow of one of our sergeants. She is, of course, steeped in fervour for the regiment . . . knows all of you by name. . . ."

The note of stiff reticence which lay at the back of all Phillida's mention of the past—the shadow of a certain stern self-repression that

grief gives to some natures—had left her, or so it seemed, with the advent of Michael.

Much of Phillida's manner was explained, since her early love affair with Frank had been revealed to me by Mrs Ben. It also made her marriage to Barry more conceivable since young romance—for her—was dead. I felt I had laid too much importance on the whole affair of the past. What did the *mésalliance*—the old enmity between Frank and Barry—matter now? Surely Barry's noble sacrifice had brought exemption from further troubles pertaining to Dick and his parentage.

I went up to the nursery and interviewed Elizabeth, expecting to share her joy in the present good. It was, however, a fearful, not a joyful, Elizabeth that greeted me, her finger on her lip. I took this to be in deference to Michael, asleep in his cradle. But I found a greater evil than a waking baby obsessed her mind.

"There's danger in this house," she whispered, looking fearfully round her and closing the door softly behind me, "danger to that innocent babe that's scarcely left heaven. It's cruel bad luck that brought him to be born here—in the 'ouse of a woman that was maid to Miss Esmé in India—when she and Master Philip was . . . friends. It's only you, sir, that can get 'em all away from it. Master Dick's got quite thick with her this holidays, and Miss Matty, too. They bear

the precious child a grudge, and it's that woman's at the bottom of it—mark my words, sir. She cheeks me, too—because she's known all the officers in the regiment. You must save your friends from her, sir."

For the first time I felt seriously annoyed with Mrs Ben and her ready tongue.

"Nonsense, Elizabeth," I said. "The past is over and done with. What harm can a silly old wife do, or want to do, to the O'Neills here? It's just a March hare you've started. I never saw the doctor or your lady so happy before."

"If I'm wrong, sir, I'll be only too pleased, but —worse luck—I'm right!"

"Well, I'm off to the Russian border, my dear Elizabeth," I said, humouring her fears, "so you must guard them as best you can."

"Well, sir, I am sure you're more needed here than watching over them Bolshie birds—that'll only try to murder you. *They* don't understand nothink but swords and slavery. The doctor 'e should 'ave more sense than to let you go."

"I'm all right, my good soul, and with you on guard here I can go with a gay heart."

"I'll do my best—you know that, sir . . . short of murderin' the woman. But who's to guard them from her evil eye?"

"Just jealousy!" I thought. "It's always jealousy with these women. They are all alike

in that. She's concerned with the past which is past, and the actors in the tragedy have themselves passed away."

But as I shook Elizabeth's hand and bid her be of good cheer, I saw as in a glass the vision of Esmé, like a butterfly in a storm—her forget-me-not eyes ablaze in her face of pearly whiteness—and time had not wiped out the words she uttered then: "I shall never forgive Philip, remember that!"

PART II.

"Alas! They had been friends in youth,
But whispering tongues can poison truth,
And constancy lives in the realms above,
And life is thorny, and youth is vain,
And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness on the brain!"

—COLERIDGE.

CHAPTER XVII.

THREE YEARS AFTER.

THREE years may be a short or a long span in a man's life. The particular three that I consumed—first as a military correspondent and latterly as a political prisoner on the Russian border—seemed to me, while they lasted, a life-long experience. It was certainly a new one. I felt sure Edward must be moving heaven and earth on my behalf, as well as more than one faithful friend in the Consular Service.

To whose good offices I owed the passport which set me free, on a sunny day in early October, it was impossible to guess. Within forty-eight hours I succeeded in reaching Paris.

Judge of my amazement when the first person I saw as I stepped on to the platform was—*Barry!*

He was the last man I had expected to see, for it was not till much later that I learnt the part he had played in effecting my release.

We gazed at one another, dumbly enough. But I found my hand gripped in a manner that made my eyes water.

It was then I spoke.

"It's a wonder you knew me again."

"Rot!" was the answer.

Barry, at all events, was much the same.

"Don't flatter yourself that you've grown too big a Bolshie hero for an M.D. to recognise his old mate under the war paint. They've half-starved you; that's the way they disguised you, I suppose. Come along!"

After that I have a vague impression of being hurried into a restaurant—being plied with food till I explained that I had yet to cultivate an appetite. I remember Barry then tried me with whisky—then a smoke. Finally he dragged me into a private room and laid me on a couch. I expostulated, and in my feeble condition my remonstrances led to my dropping the cigarette that I held in my hand. After that I collapsed ignominiously.

I had contracted typhoid, it seemed, or something like it; and for twenty-one days Barry nursed me with the skill and determination of a dozen nurses. At the end of that time my appearance in the glass began to be less repellent to my imagination.

"The barber and the tailor are all you need

now, my boy, to make a new man of you . . . or rather to give us back our old F.F. Double F.F.'s going strong still, eh?—work well—in harness, in spite of being out of practice, what?"

Finding I was averse to any recital of my experiences, he accepted the excuse of: "Time enough when it comes to making a book of 'em, or a set of articles for the 'Daily Surprise,' eh? Tell me about the folks at home, Barry; your own first of all—Phillida and the baby? Why, he must be nearly four now, by Jove! A proper boy—the only child still. Well, well! Time enough. . . . Haven't you any gossip to entertain me with? Fire away! I'm starving for news of Blighty!"

He entertained me accordingly with politics—at home and abroad—and further with stories of Elizabeth . . . Ben . . . and the changes that had taken place in the affairs of the O'Neill family since last I was in England.

I found that Corner Street had been abandoned.

Phillida was actually occupying Greenfields, the lease of her war tenants having run out. The Bens had followed in her train, having sold the house in Corner Street, and Dick had set up in digs on his own account.

"And how come you here?" I interrupted at last. "You have told me many things, but left

out the most important fact. Why do I find you in Paris of all places, and able to waste your time over me? That is still a mystery. . . ."

"Oh, it's all most uninteresting, I assure you —to a layman, at any rate. I am studying Continental methods of dealing with shell-shock cases . . . and discussing with these French specialists the origin of various nerve complaints."

"But what made you take it up?"

"Oh, many reasons—mostly professional ones —also, in this foreign work, I thought . . . there was no knowing but our paths might cross . . . somehow . . . and it has come to pass . . . right enough!"

"Barry!"

I suddenly saw it all.

"Well, you *are* a chap! So it was you dug me out of that."

He disclaimed it at the time. But when, after my recovery, I cross-questioned one of the Embassy fellows, and he admitted as much, Barry saw denial was useless. Then he took the tone that safety, to all parties, lay in silence.

The circumstances which led to my capture, and eventually to my release, do not concern these pages, except in so far as they relate to Barry; and when I found that the Consular Service shared his view, that the less said about

the whole matter the better, there was nothing for it but to keep the method of his gallant rescue a secret.

As we both mutually barred all talk on recent events, I turned again to persistent inquiries of home.

Since my illness, all excitement of fresh faces being forbidden, Edward and everyone else had been told to await my convalescence. Thus it fell out that Barry was the only person I could victimise with my endless questions. He kept my curiosity successfully at bay for some time; but when I came to the bed-rock of his own family news, I found I was right in suspecting that all was not well. Barry's reticence spelt trouble of some kind.

At first he would not own to difficulties over Dick, only spoke of an improvement since Eve had taken him in hand. But, after a bit, it came out. Dick had strongly opposed the move to Greenfields.

"God knows why! Phillida is free to do what she wills with her own: it's everything for Michael, country life—and—Greenfields will be his. His mother wants him to grow up in the atmosphere of it all. It's a splendid place! As you know, had I had any idea . . . Phillida would never have been my wife. . . . Well, that's an old story—not worth speaking about now, only—

something rankles with Dick. I have tried to get to the bottom of it. He seems to hate going to Greenfields, and yet, just as I left he spoke—almost as if he had some right to the place himself——"

"Damn it, the boy must be mad!" I flared up, a vague dread seizing me as I recalled Elizabeth's scare-words when I last saw her three years ago.

Barry changed my thoughts immediately after by saying: "By-the-bye, old chap, I have never yet told you that I've got to know your friend—Miss Mainwaring. She wrote and asked me to go and see her mother; and I was fortunate in prescribing for her with some success. She then spoke to me—very sensibly—about Dick. It was the time we were most anxious about you, she—no, I'm wrong—it was the time when Miss Mainwaring herself was ill that she spoke to me about——"

"What! Eve ill?" I exclaimed. "I never knew Eve ill in my life. She gets tired out with that mother of hers from time to time. Who wouldn't with a case of softening of the brain? It takes some living with—but ill—what's wrong with her?"

"Steady, old chap, she's all right now—we all got a bit rattled—about you, you know. As a matter of fact, I sent her a wire from here on your

arrival, and she offered to come and nurse you a fortnight ago—when you took a bad turn."

"Tell that to the Marines, my dear fellow. She's never left her mother in her life since the old lady had a stroke and lost her memory fifteen years ago!"

"Yes, yes, I know, but she found Elizabeth ready to undertake the responsibility. Her mother took a great fancy to Mrs Ben when they came down for a week-end to Greenfields."

"Good Lord! Eve and her mother! How on earth did Eve and Phillida get on?" I asked —after a pause to take all the facts in.

Barry laughed. "Well, to tell the truth, I don't think they hit it off very well. . . . There's this business of Ruth and her profession!"

"Ah!" I remembered my talk with Eve, and what I had proposed. "That girl's not on the stage, I hope?"

"Well, not exactly—I don't know; she may be now. The last thing I heard she was doing things at a cabaret till something better turned up."

"I was dead against it," I said, "before I left——"

"Well, Phillida has been so dead against it . . . that she would not have the girl to Greenfields. Dick was angry, and—well—they quarrelled."

"I don't see that *that* matters much," I said, absurdly relieved. "I always thought Dick required to learn the art of standing on his own feet."

"Yes, perhaps, but still—the controversy has a little embittered Phillida. It has made her—unfair to Ruth. . . . She has misjudged the girl before hearing the facts. She blames her . . . for Dick's idea of singing in public——"

"That's rough on Ruth. Dick's a craven fellow if he takes shelter behind a girl——"

"Look here, old chap——"

Barry turned to me impulsively, the doctor lost in the friend.

"I once—snapped you up—over some advice . . . you gave me just after we married. I have thought of it often since. *Then* . . . I might have followed it. But Dick's youth . . . Phillida's innocence . . . and their friendship, seemed to make it, every way, a cruelty to both. Besides, there was always my promise to Esmé. Now a third barrier has come to light, and makes it quite impossible to—tell her the truth."

"What's that?"

I knew the answer before it came.

"I have come to know that she was engaged to Frank Gordon—before the war, and but for his death——"

"Did *she* tell you that?"

"No."

"Who did then—not Elizabeth?"

I felt I could not forgive Elizabeth if she had let her tongue run away so far as to break faith with me.

"No—if you must know—it was Dick!"

"Well, he's wrong. Anyway . . . they were *not* engaged. . . . No doubt he was smitten. She was a mere schoolgirl—seventeen—they saw very little of each other. It's all dead and gone, my dear chap—ten years ago. It's a thing of the past——"

"It's not! It's alive to this day. It is the secret of Dick's—influence over her. She can see no wrong in him, on that account. Blood, too, has something to do with it, no doubt . . . but it is really his likeness to . . . Frank. She worships—that man's memory."

"Has she ever spoken to you of him?"

"Never!" Barry's face was dark. Seldom had I seen his eyes so inky-black before—those eyes that changed with every changing phase of thought or feeling, from the turgid gloom of a Scotch burn in spate—when he was in troublous mood, to the pale iridescence of a star—when his mind was at peace. One moment they might be on fire with a hundred angry lights, the next sparkling with the tenderness of rippled water—a golden gleam. Now, while he brooded over

the trouble he had but half-divulged, they recalled to me the black pools I had so often gazed out at beyond my prison walls.

I felt, more than ever, the importance of his telling the truth to Phillida.

I would, if I mistook not, kill the sentiment she harboured for an imaginary hero—all that Frank Gordon's memory stood for—just as her father's passion for Esmé had died the night he learnt the truth about her! I had never spoken to Barry about her affair with Philip; and he would have refused to hear a word about her past from me—even had I felt equal to the task of enlightening him in the old days. But that Frank—even in his grave—should stand between Barry and Phillida, as he had stood in his lifetime between Esmé and Barry! It was an unbearable thought!

Here truly was the doom of the Dundarrans dogging the children's footsteps, even unto the third generation.

Suddenly Barry broke the silence again.

"Lastly," he said, "there is Dick to consider. It was for *his* sake that Esmé made me promise, and—so far—I have kept my word to her—in the letter as well as the spirit. I could do no less—but the consequences have been confoundly . . . far-reaching."

Suddenly, as I glanced at those brooding eyes,

I realised that Barry had never been blind—all these years! He must have taken Esmé's measure, and must have known by instinct—if not by hearsay—of Philip, of Frank, of the others.

He was right; the consequences were reaching out far beyond the lives of Esmé, Frank, and Philip; Dick's character—as well as his existence—being one of the consequences.

CHAPTER XVIII.

I RETURN TO BLIGHTY.

WHEN Edward and a score of friends turned up in Paris to greet my convalescence, Barry was for returning to his tour of Continental hospitals; but I refused to be parted from him till I entered the Dover boat.

He and Edward had only once met—ten years ago,—and my critical elder brother had then classed him amongst my 'queer' friends. *Now*, with the knowledge that we owed my life, as well as my liberty, to Barry's intervention, he was obliged to modify his attitude—a certain negligent tolerance of the unimportant people who existed outside his own circle. In any case, the respect with which he found Barry's name to be held in French official circles forced him in a measure to reform his estimate of the doctor, if not of the man.

"No ordinary army M.D. of the pill-box order," he said (as though *I* had originally

misled him), "but one of our rising medical men, I find—of the scientific-research type,—with a Continental reputation, too."

And all the while I knew Barry to be smiling his kindly tolerant smile over my smart friends.

If they thought him queer, he certainly returned the compliment. He and Phillida were both of one mind in their measure of the fashionable tribe of men and women who since the war (if not before) had so generously opened their doors to the wealthy Goth. If they had not actually initiated him into their inner order of freemasonry, they suffered his money gladly. Not so the poor man himself by any means.

I had never forgotten Phillida's quondam remark, overheard one day in Corner Street, which showed that she judged us as one might irresponsible children—neither bitterly nor seriously, but certainly wholly without envy!

If she and Edward could but meet! His views on Barry's status would then receive further correction.

"That man knows his own mind," remarked Lady Dorinda of Barry, as he left the room, having flatly contradicted her as to her dictum on my diet. She and her brother had deigned to pay me a visit in my rooms near the Luxemburg Gardens.

"Quite an autocrat!" she went on. "He

wouldn't hesitate to set Royalty right if he found them interfering with his medical orders. . . . I rather think I should like that kind of man as my doctor. I am so tired of the Harley Street brand. They simply find out what you want, and then prescribe it . . . Egypt . . . or baths . . . or fencing . . . a rest cure, or a course of opera bouffe! It's humiliating when you come to think of it——"

"Rather an expensive process of getting your own way," I chimed in at last.

"Now that man," Lady Dorinda continued, ignoring my flippancy, "that man would as likely as not order something beastly—like a cold douche at 6 A.M. or Jaeger undies——"

"And uppers too, very likely," I added, gazing at the fair lady's filmy frock. It was innocent of sleeves, and the skirt suggested that the dressmaker had run short of material. "Anyway, his prescription would include hard work, and not, probably, more than two meals a day—I wouldn't risk it," I concluded significantly, as my eye wandered over the lady's ample contours. (Eve's figure always made me critical of other women's.) Lady Dorinda was certainly two sizes larger than when we last met at Haddons some four years ago, and fished in a boat together on Loch Bittern the whole of a cloudy September afternoon.

It was the next day that I announced to Barry, "I can't stand this any longer. You must prescribe me England—and Greenfields and a rest from the fashionable world! I am out of practice in the art of concealing boredom. I must have time, too, to acquire the latest idioms in modern slang before I venture into cultured circles again. By the way, I have just been learning the latest Harley Street methods. You give the specialist a tip—of two kinds—and he carries out your wishes, regardless of heartless husbands or partial parents, 'the patient's health must be the first consideration'! *Voilà tout!*"

Barry entered with spirit into the game. He achieved Edward's approval of my spending a week or two in the uplands of Yorkshire.

"What! Old Lady Fane's lovely Manor House—of course—the very place! Who does it belong to now? A hotel, I suppose? No? Your wife has it—temporarily? Owns it, did you say? Oh! I beg your pardon, I never realised . . . that's Jim's fault. . . . The late Captain Fane's daughter? Oh! Sir Edward's grandchild—now the owner, of course—of the Brackenbury Manor House?"

In the past I should have received a good wigging for not having put Edward *au fait* of facts. He considered that part of a younger brother's duties—'coaching the prince,'

I used to style it irreverently—in younger days.

Just now, however, as an interesting convalescent and a society celebrity for the nonce, my mistakes were leniently dealt with, and I escaped whipping, proving also that Barry could be a diplomat as well as an autocrat! There were hopes, I told him, of his qualifying for Harley Street yet!

As we parted I said to him, "Any messages for home, old chap?"

Never, since that unsealed talk in regard to Barry's skeleton, had we touched on the subject again, but at the eleventh hour I ventured on the remark that had been on my tongue to utter more than once: "Do you know you have never told me anything about Michael?"

"Yes . . . yes, I am quite aware of that," he said with his cryptic look. "I decided to leave you to judge for yourself."

"If he has fulfilled the promise he gave when I saw him at Seastone, he should be *some* boy," I proceeded. "I understand it's the fashion now to sprinkle one's talk with American phrases—I hope he's not as badly spoilt as most children of to-day."

"Ah!" said Barry, "there you have touched a tender spot. Phillida is most strict. She thinks—and I am sure she's right—the boy is safer

under her discipline. I am a weak father . . . as you know."

His manner and the flush on his face convinced me I had indeed touched upon a sore point. His pride in Michael had been one of the brightest memories that I carried away with me to the Balkans. Well, well! What wonder—poor chap, when one thought of—Dick! And the ghost of Frank!

Before leaving Paris I sent a wire to Eve, asking her if she could put me up at Bude for a night before I went north to Greenfields. Hence, on arriving at Dover, my first concern at the hotel was her reply. I gazed at the pink envelope which awaited me with confident pleasure. But, as usual, where Eve was concerned, the reply was an unexpected one. It ran: "Full up here for the next fortnight with Ruth and Dick. See you London, 11th."

If she had felt keen enough to come to Paris for the privilege of seeing me die, she might at least have found Dick a room elsewhere for one night!

Eve clearly had not changed! The pleasure she formerly took in snubbing me—whenever I had reason to take a cheerful view of the future—obviously remained! She was as consistent as ever in her inconsistency! By Barry's account, a man might justly have considered she would,

at least, be as impatient as other old friends to see me . . . after those three years . . . and my illness.

Thus it befell that on a warm day, in late October, I found myself at Dulford Station. Just four-and-twenty hours before the time I had told Phillida to expect me!

I chartered a stray car.

Dismissing the man at Greenfields lodge gates, I elected to take the short cut to the Manor House.

The afternoon heralded a St Luke's summer. The long avenue stretched before me in the full glory of russet and gold—the famous Greenfields beeches. Every by-path recalled some youthful adventure in which Philip and I had made glad the long summer days of a schoolboy's holiday. Those triumphant hours that linked the magic spell of nursery days with the dawn of manhood! From afar we scented the coming days of the Promised Land when, emancipated from the futilities of pastors and masters, we should spend our lives to better purpose than our benighted instructors; for, wrapped in the garment of ignorance, we remained sceptical of the temptations and tragedies with which certain conscientious bores would warningly declare our path to be beset.

Why prophesy dark things to those who—yet within the Garden—reck not of the Serpent or the Angel of the Flaming Sword? Why prate of the inexorable years to come, when our youth shall lie buried behind us? Why preach of gloomy days, while hearts beat high with a hope as yet undimmed by the shattering forces of reality?

Who, among the wisest of them, could have foreseen that Philip, before he reached thirty, would be laid in a soldier's grave beside an African river? Whilst I, having experienced a dozen campaigns, at fifty, should survive four years of a murderous war; yet more, should live to come through a three years' exile and imprisonment?

The rôle of prisoner, seen through the golden haze of our boyish dreams, had been among our highest flights of ambition!

Even less could we imagine that a mysterious enchantress (whom we believed was wont to haunt the Greenfields woods) should, in our manhood, actually divide friends so staunch as Philip and I!

Least of all could we dream of the part that Phillida was to play, all unconsciously, in the drama of Esmé's life, that at an age scarcely greater than Michael's she was to baulk her of

Philip. Philip—her greatest triumph, her dearest ambition, her heart's desire.

As I gazed upon the scene before me, I wondered had these fair lands—Greenfields and all it stood for—aught to say to the stern rejection by which Philip had chosen to tear the heart from his own breast, sooner than hand over his child and his heritage to this soul-destroying woman?

In spite of the inevitable instinct by which youth discards the warnings of old age, Philip had imbibed the Victorian nightmare of the scarlet woman! In the days of our youth the woman who broke faith and the seventh commandment, placed herself in the category of those to whom no pity can be granted—no extenuation of circumstances—without endangering the soul of society—without quenching the sacred fires of home life—unto the third and fourth generation.

Still, it was my firm conviction that Philip had acted, not merely in accordance with the principles of his elders, nor had he merely reverted to type, in his decision. Rather had he acted on the impulse, which bade him refuse to ruin his own life as well as that of his child.

A *mariage de convenance*—arranged for him by his mother when he was but five-and-twenty—had not suggested to him a reason for breaking

faith with his conscience and his inheritance; though Elizabeth's words had once struck cold upon my heart, as suggesting possibilities of which I had never dreamed,—Barry's promise to Esmé having made it impossible for him to discuss past events with me.

From first to last Esmé seemed veritably doomed to retaliate upon the unconscious child-heiress of Greenfields, either through her father or her lover, if not through both.

Which of us, from the heart of youthful dreams or by the prophetic instinct of riper years, could have visioned Barry as the knight destined for Phillida's rescue. Still less the chosen instrument for Esmé's salvation! Personally, I had always regarded him as a scapegoat—a scapegoat relegated to the wilderness of a lonely heart in order that he might bear the penalty of the passions of others.

And now, I asked myself, what of the future? Was Phillida to be Barry's reward? Would she repay his sacrifice of himself, so blindly made on Esmé's behalf as a result of Philip's rejection of her and Frank's seduction?

Musing thus, I turned, subconsciously, to the right, down the glade where Philip and I had so often held mystic revel with Robin Hood and his Merry Men; when on glancing ahead, my

thoughts—still upon the past—received a sudden check.

From out the greenwood I espied the figure of a child flying, fleet-footed. Brown limbs, chestnut curls, violet eyes in a cherub face.

It was Michael.

CHAPTER XIX.

MICHAEL.

ALONG a winding way, studded by beech leaves, the boy ran, scattering the autumn trophies at his feet ; like a shower of jewels they flashed and whirled across his path, sunlit and wind-swept.

At first I fancied he was running to greet me. Then I realised that he saw me not at all. He was pursuing a bird—his head high, his eyes gazing upward. He laughed as though to urge his winged companion to prolong the race. Suddenly he stopped short—the bird had staged its course, and sat perched upon a tree-top. I had thus time to recognise unobserved the broad brow of his grandfather and the bronze of his mother's hair. But his personality, his aura—call it what you will,—belonged neither to Fanes nor Broadbents. The spirit that possessed this small person was obviously of Barry's making.

I was now close beside the boy, having stepped

lightly over the carpet of moss that wove its way among the beeches: in spring, yellow with Lent lilies, now flecked with the glory of autumn's red and gold.

No wonder Barry had said, "I leave you to judge for yourself."

Here indeed was a beautiful boy—Dick's good looks as a young child being commonplace by comparison.

Absorbed in this vision of four-year-old loveliness, I was as unconscious of Phillida's approach as the child was of mine.

She held out both hands in eager welcome. During my three years' absence, married life had developed and matured her beauty. Her dignity of bearing more than ever recalled the great ladies of Sir Joshua and his school.

Seeing her thus, there stole across my mind the quaint remark of the working man on her wedding day when he saw Barry beside her: "Not much of a match I call that."

Edward would certainly be of the same opinion, although he would express himself in different terms of speech. Yet was this disparity more apparent than real, for one linked them unconsciously in spirit as those who dwelt apart from the world and its votaries. They took the same measure of life. Their minds matched, though Phillida's had been guarded in its early growth

within the shelter of this paradise, while Barry's from boyhood had faced every dragon in the path of virtue—the parents of the one having hailed from Yorkshire and the Fen country, the other from Scotland and the Western Isles.

I explained my too early arrival and the cause of it. Phillida's silence conveyed her criticism of Eve more eloquently than any words could have done, though her only comment was, "I hope you did not walk from the station."

"No fear! I chartered a car. But really—thanks to Barry's doctoring—I'm up to anything now!"

"You hardly look it, and I've a host of instructions about you from him."

All this time the 'vision' stood mute but self-contained, having merely signified his awareness of a strange presence by slipping a small sunburnt hand into his mother's. Suddenly it found voice: "Are you Daddy's fiend what they starved in a pwison?"

"A good guess. What's more, but for Daddy I should be buried there still."

"How long was you deaded before he dug you up?"

I laughed. "A matter of three years."

Phillida was smiling the proud possessive smile of happy motherhood. Whence had come Barry's discomfort? Here was no stiff and starched

parent of the old Quaker school, but a simple, if self-contained, girl, the same Phillida I had criticised at first, and been charmed by afterwards. Direct, deliberate, kindly—not altogether blind to new ideas. Surely so radiant a face would be incapable of repining or of concealing morbid thoughts in regard to a dead lover. Too possessive and dominant I could imagine she might be in her views of the boy's upbringing, for instance. Selfish, too, perhaps, in shutting out a father's share in the child.

That thought led me to Dick, and as we wended our way slowly through the wood I asked for news of him.

"Dick has got into the hands of a chorus girl," she answered gravely. "Barry has been very stupid over it; he's so weak in giving in to the children over anything they want to do. He's even been letting Dick lower himself by going into a cabaret show. It's just the temptation to be with that girl and earn a little more money. I have stopped it by giving him a definite allowance from my own income."

"Isn't that giving in to him, too? Almost bribing him?" I asked with a twinkle.

She smiled indulgently, having failed altogether to grasp my point of view.

"Times are changed now," I pleaded. "Society looks at these things with very different eyes."

"I don't see how that affects the matter," she parried. "Anything is better—even what you call bribing—than mixing himself up with stage people."

"I believe they're a very respectable, hard-working set," I said sententiously. "The brilliant and the bad are exceptions with them, I imagine, as in any other profession. But for all that I must own that before I went to the Balkans I, too, was trying to keep Ruth Mainwaring from taking up the stage. I've a great opinion of Ruth," I added somewhat aggressively.

I was naturally nettled by hearing her called a chorus girl.

"I know her aunt is a friend of yours," Phillida said, after a pause. "But I must be honest and tell you I consider her greatly to blame in the matter."

"Every boy or girl does just what they like—nowadays," I parried with a deprecating laugh. "As for Eve Mainwaring, whom I've known since she was a schoolgirl, *her* pride is a fearsome thing, and Ruth's is nearly as bad. There is no getting Ruth to give up her work by offering her money."

Again Phillida's silence suggested further criticism of both, but she brushed aside the subject by saying, "We've missed you frightfully; and I'm sure you would have made Barry see how wrong it is to give Dick and Matty their own

way over everything. He would be even worse over Michael if I let him. It makes me almost thankful he's on foreign service just now. If it's too late to save Dick and Matty from the evils of a spoilt childhood, I'm determined Michael shan't suffer in the same way. If he's to take his place as owner of Greenfields, he must learn to do things he doesn't like."

"I see your point; it was Lady Fane's. But Barry is not the only weak father I have come across. The old general found it very hard to say no to Philip, and the boy knew it."

"Ah!" she sighed. "You can remember what I can't. It's strange to think I never actually saw my father. I was born just after the regiment left for India, and he went straight from there to the Boer War."

(Ah! could *I* ever forget that fact.)

"Yet," she went on, "though I never saw him, he's somehow dearer to me than anyone, even my mother, who I can just remember. But, of course, the darling old grandparents were all I really knew as a girl. . . ."

Michael was making amends for our slow progress by running round the trunk of every beech-tree we passed—with the inevitable result. He barged into one and got his head bruised. Casting himself upon his mother for sympathy he got none. "Oh, that's nothing!" she said, rubbing

his head. "Go and see if you hurt the tree!" With that he was off to examine the offending tree bark, now translated into a damaged companion.

"We must have talks about my father and the old Greenfield days." Phillida turned to me, but her eyes were veiled under their drooping lids. "You will help us all—Elizabeth, too—Elizabeth is longing to see you—but" (with an entire change of tone) "all this must seem so trivial to you after your terrible experiences. . . . Not that I'm going to talk to you about them. I'm sure just now you must want to forget it all."

If only others had shown the same consideration! In Phillida's manner, at all events, there lurked no suspicion of curiosity. With her, too, I should be safe from misplaced sympathy.

But Michael, who had now rejected the tree trunks and was walking soberly by his mother's side, had no such scruples.

"Was there any fairlies in your pwison?" he asked, standing on tiptoe in front of me, apparently in order to get a clearer view of my eyes.

Though no sort of use with an infant in arms, I am allowed to be quite an adept at the early stages of social intercourse. Indeed, I have often found the nursery crowd more intelligible than the modern school and college set, with their smart catch-words of the hour. The contempt

of present-day youth for any but the slang of its own generation is apt to reduce me to silence.

Meanwhile with Michael it was plain sailing.

"Yes," I said, "there were fairies in the Balkans, though most of them must be starved out by now. But I did meet one, a very clever fairy, who helped me to escape."

"Then pwraps you've seen *my* fairlies. They live funny ways in people's eyes, and they peep frough, but sometimes they hide."

"Oh yes," I said. "I know those hide-and-seek fellows. They are excellent chaps; they tell one tons of things."

"Don't they?" he cried jubilantly. "Mummy, he knows my fairlies, and he says they're 'ex'nent chaps.'"

"Yes, indeed. We must have a great talk about them—but another time," I added, seeing a nursemaid descending upon us. "Just now there's someone coming to escort your lordship to his siesta."

"He called me a lord, Mummy."

"That's his fun, darling. Colonel Carmichael is full of fun."

"Is he? How lovely! And he's got my name, too, so we must be two twins."

In this way my friendship with Michael began.

CHAPTER XX.

CONCERNING GREENFIELDS.

"Now you must come and see Elizabeth."

Thus Phillida an hour later, as we sat within the shade of the old cedar, surrounded by the luxuries of a Corner Street tea, plus the charm and beauty of Greenfields, its china and its silver, not to speak of its distant view from the side lawn. Phillida was wielding the same Queen Anne teapot from which Lady Fane was in the habit of dispensing her rare 'Pekoe blend,' famed throughout the district. Some said it was provided to revive the fainting spirits of those she summoned to meet her on matters parochial.

I recalled a certain curate we rescued one day, though it spoilt the sport of a fine summer's afternoon.

Philip and I were slinking off to our secret 'wigwam,' in the beech-woods, while we left Lady Fane and the curate to finish their tea together. As we made the code signal for escape,

our blood was curdled by the tone in which the wretched man muttered to Philip, "Can't I join your game?" Adding in a ghastly whisper to me, "For heaven's sake don't leave me alone!"

Needless to say, we played no game that afternoon, save the game of decent behaviour to a luckless visitor.

"Poor chap!" I exclaimed, when we finally got rid of him. I'm sure he funked Lady Fane's preaching.

"Well, he's elected to preach all his life, so he ought to understand Granny liking it."

"But it's shop to him, and he wanted a change from it—at tea-time, anyway. . . . He was taking another slice of cake, but Lady Fane stared at him so he dropped it like a hot potato."

"It's fatal if you funk the Mater," was Philip's answer.

I remembered it to this day, for I had a sneaking fellow-feeling for that young deacon. Lady Fane's stare was always apt to try my nerves. Sitting there beside her granddaughter, the whole scene flashed back upon me as though it had been yesterday.

Finding me inattentive to her first appeal, Phillida again said, "I must take you now to see Elizabeth. She's been almost as anxious about you as Barry. She considers you as a kind of

guardian angel to the family. I always tell Barry he doesn't believe in my powers of running a house without Elizabeth, and Elizabeth thinks we're all in danger of coming to grief but for your hovering wings. There's glory for you! A different kind from the lionising you will get when you join your fashionable friends."

Thus suddenly would Phillida—no less than Barry—make me feel an outsider in their midst even as Eve and Ruth were apt to do. I resented it at times, though I could not but own to myself there was justification for it. These folk—the O'Neills and the Mainwarings—lived their lives, made their decisions, untrammelled by fear or favour of the crowd. In common prose, they were independent of their surroundings. This, in the Fane family, I attributed to the Quaker nonconformity to fashion. Their rooted disdain of the world's judgments.

In the General it was the strain of the Scot through his mother that held him aloof from the fashion of his day.

As long as he commanded the 90th, smoking among his officers was taboo, for no other reason than that the General did not smoke himself.

This unconscious quality of leadership certainly belonged to the Fanes as a family. I often contrasted it with Edward's conscious sense of superiority, and his unconscious subserviency to

the thoughts and actions of his own set. But, as Eve is fond of saying, "It takes all sorts to make a world. . . ."

When Phillida and I eventually reached the housekeeper's room, Elizabeth gave me a warm welcome. Stouter and more careworn than when I last saw her, she was otherwise unchanged. So eager was she to learn whether I had been beaten and persecuted that when she found I had been actually treated with some respect she was distinctly disappointed.

"Ben 'e said all along they'd never dare—but there! as I told 'im. 'Bolshie is as Bolshie does,' so what can you expect? 'Owever, they'd your regimentals to go by, and that, of course, is feared by 'Ottentot and 'Indu alike, so the Army's useful when you come to think of it, sir, though they'd 'ave us believe we've no use for it these days."

At first the interview with my old friend lacked the spice of Corner Street days. For one thing Ben was present, and he, as I knew of old, always kept her tongue in order; but when he disappeared muttering something about the 'Colonel's boots,' the Elizabeth of old looked me in the eyes as she said, "'E finds it terrible 'ard work living up to 'is bailiff's billet. Nothing to do with 'is own hands, but finding jobs for other folks. It fair exhausts 'is spirits. Ben never was one of

the lazy kind; 'e 'ankers after getting away by 'isself with a pile of gent's clothes to brush."

"Well, Elizabeth," I interrupted, "let me congratulate you on the successful way you've led the family back out of the wilderness of London to this jolly old place, while I've been wasting my days in a country where hostages and bribes still obtain. Thank God we're free from such things here!"

"Oh, don't tempt Providence by such remarks as that, sir. It gives me the creeps." And she looked round in a worried way. I noticed, now the first flush of pleasure at my greeting had died down, that there was a wistful hunted look in Mrs Ben's eyes, never seen there in Corner Street days.

"Oh, we *'ave* missed you sore, sir. 'Ad you been here, you'd have stood out agin Master Dick bringing 'is mother's portrait to this 'ouse—to disturb the peace of everyone in it. There's witchery in the very face of 'er, if you believe me. Even Miss Phillida herself can't get away from it."

"Why! Where is it?" I asked, astounded.

"In the droring-room, sir. Don't you git lookin' at it or talkin' of it, or it'll do you a mischief, as sure's fate. It's got hold of my lady—she'll stand starin' at it . . . by the 'alf-hour—and the evil eye in it fair frightens

Master Michael, poor lamb; though, maybe, Master Dick's responsible for that! He bullies the child—though it's by stealth—like all 'is doings. But you keep clear o' that picture, sir!"

"Elizabeth, my dear soul!" I exclaimed, "I never came across such a far-fetched notion—not even in the Balkans! A picture—to bewitch anyone!"

"Well, sir, you surprise me. I thought they Bolshie birds denied the spirit that's in us. But if they yonder know the power of such unbeseen things, they're not without a kind of sense."

"Maybe. . . . But that kind of sense wants keeping under, Elizabeth, though I'll grant you it's hard to kill."

At that moment I espied a jug on the mantelpiece—a jug that Philip and I had, time and again, taken out upon our expeditions (not as boy scouts, but as bold buccaneers).

I seized it in triumph. "You see what careful youngsters we were, Elizabeth. We lived in a stern age, when to break things was a crime. Now, Michael, I'll be bound, breaks his toys and other things without fear of punishment."

"The little master! Bless 'is 'eart! 'E don't break no toys. 'E scarce ever plays with anythink of wood or stone, as you might say. 'E lives in a dream world of 'is own, and takes no account of nothink 'e can 'andle, so to speak,

unless it's beasts and birds. 'E's got the sense, you seem to set no store by, sir, but it's the blessed angels that have charge of such as he is. They'll see to it no witchery touches 'im. Though it's from Master Dick and Miss Matty he wants defending. Somethink's stirred them up of late, they've cruel 'earts towards that child."

"But what has Michael done to them?" I asked.

"You may well ask, sir. If he'd pitched 'em out of paradise they could feel no worse towards 'im. It's my belief the doctor's gone abroad to lighten it for the child. He daren't scarce look at Master Michael if they're about—Miss Matty she shows it—plain's a peastick; but Master Dick, 'e's too deep for that. 'E'll let 'is father feel it under the skin, so to speak—as well as the child. If you was to see 'im putting 'is father in the wrong a dozen times a day with my lady, and the doctor never say so much as a word—you'd bust, sir."

"But why doesn't Miss Phillida put a stop to it?" I asked indignantly.

"It's my belief Miss Phillida don't notice it, sir—or she thinks the doctor don't; which way it is I can't tell you. But Ben—he says it's neither. 'E's for it—that the master's mind is set, like you'd think the nobility's should be—on the sky-line, as you might say, so they don't

notice the splashing of the mud at their feet. But *I knows* the doctor feels it, sir, say what Ben will. Master Dick 'ud get no pleasure from it if 'e didn't see it went 'ome, so to speak."

Again her face had a scared expression as she drew herself up to say: "Take a look round, sir; you'll find many a thing you remember in the blessed days gone by."

So I skirmished not only round the housekeeper's room—dear to the memory of a schoolboy's palate,—but round many an old haunt of boyhood.

. . . . . .

Inwardly vexed with Eve for keeping me thus at arm's length, I had nothing for it but to wait, day by day, for the time of her relenting. At Greenfields I could, at least, remain content to abide where round me lay memories of countless happy days with Philip in the Long Ago. The copse, the river, the covey, the lake and farm, all had served their purpose by ministering to our sport and our friendship. The atmosphere, as well as the setting, remained singularly unchanged, for the presiding genius, as of yore, was a woman!

The General had been from first to last (even to the short-sighted eyes of boyhood) but a figurehead. His Yea had been useless, we found, if confronted by Lady Fane's Nay. I longed to

see Barry under the same circumstances, but I found he had never yet given himself the time to steal more than a week-end, occasionally, from his hospital work. (In Town he must have missed the ministrations of Elizabeth and Ben.) Here they were, more or less, invisible, I found. Elizabeth as housekeeper, and Ben as bailiff, or rather as a useful factotum in farm, garden, and house. The maids might cheek Mrs Ben (I felt it was a possibility), but no man, whether farm-hand, gardener, or labourer, could get past Ben's silence; his brick-like face and blank eyes that looked through them. These two faithful stewards played their part, but the Lady of the Manor was mistress.

Herein lay Phillida's power—a power as great as Lady Fane's,—though, unlike her, she had not attempted to wield it beyond the household circle. Yet Phillida's rule was obviously the outcome of a training no less than an inheritance. In short, she bore the mark of her grandfather's upbringing. If a Quaker by birth, she had been reared by a soldier. She had none of Lady Fane's autocratic sternness, none of Lady Dorinda's petty vanity and self-appraisement. Her attitude recalled that of the best type of young subaltern, one who rules without any pretence to superior gifts of intellect or foresight; simply accepting the call of leadership. The sort of boy

who has the men of his company in the hollow of his hand. Even so, Phillida—with the natural simplicity of girlhood—kept that large place in the hollow of her hand; knew from her grandfather's training the secret of good farming, the value of pasture-land; and took no credit to herself for the well-stored granaries any more than she did for the well-oiled wheels. But the decision and judgment with which she engaged one man and dismissed another was a lesson in stewardship.

And the while she gave herself up for a portion of every day to the unspeakable joy of watching Michael. Not that she allowed him to follow at her heels. His hours of sleep, his daily walks with Elizabeth, daily games with the young nursemaid, were carefully defined. I could not but contrast his upbringing with that of Dick—ever at his mother's apron-strings. But, without fail, after breakfast, after lunch and after tea, Phillida's time with Michael was held sacred. A farmer calling about a load of hay—a market gardener about fruit—were bidden to come at another hour. I was privileged to be present during more than one of these hours dedicated to Michael and to Michael alone.

Our comradeship grew by leaps and bounds. One day he asked for an interview with me all 'by my lone.'

"I can't talk 'bout my fairlies wif you, Mummy, cos you don't *see* t'em—and Lisbet and Jessie don't."

So it came to be established that, after meals, we had a little chat by ourselves in the smoking-room on 'fairlies' in general, and Michael's in particular.

I had little to say myself upon the subject, but I knew of old that the delight in listening to stories is as nothing—to the imaginative child—compared with the joy of telling them to a secret and chosen companion, placed under vow 'never to tell!'

But woe betide the inattentive listener!

Lack of quickness to seize the idea is at once mercilessly spotted. Some children's confidences have sent me to sleep, others have alarmed me! Michael's had the hall-mark of the Celt upon them. This was Barry's boy. Every day revealed that fact more clearly. The envelope of life concerned him but little. He was out to find the core, the kernel, the hidden seed, the mystery that lies at the back of nature. Not merely her colour, sound, or sweetness sufficed for him.

"What does it *say?*" he would ask, whether of a bird's song, the hum of a bee, the chirp of a cricket. "Why does it do that?"

From the opening and fading colour of the rose

to the ripening ear of corn—no actual facts would suffice the hungry soul of the child aching to learn just something besides the tangible; something that stood for 'fairlies.'

And once he discovered that I listened intelligently to his confidences, as to 'the fairlies' he found in 'people's eyes,' he loved to give me the secret messages which came to him from these mysterious beings. They spoke to some purpose, it seemed.

"Ben has got a funny fairly in *his* eyes. It can't speak and it hides away. It wants to fly from peoples, and it doesn't want to tell nothing to nobody."

"Lisbet's fairly? Oh, it's got hundreds of eyes. It just wiggles to get out—to jump on you if you're naughty, and hugs you when you're good. . . . It *never* sleeps—Lisbet's fairly—I don't fink."

"Perhaps it dozes a bit on dull days—when there's nothing doing," I said.

"No, it couldn't do that," he replied, with entire conviction.

One day, thinking of Barry, I was prompted to ask, "And what about Daddy's fairy; you've never told me about it?"

"Oh, he has two fairlies what come and go. One is quick and full of fire and the other is—oh, juss like Daddy! You know—what makes

you feel safe; holding you tight—and never hurting——"

"Yes, that's Daddy," I said, "right enough."

And how, in the name of wonder, I would think for the hundredth time, can he fiddle away at broken-down, shell-shocked mortals, when the gods have bestowed upon him this delectable child, as well as a noble wife and a beautiful home?

But there it was! Barry had always been a riddle to the regiment. And any attempt to measure his motives always proved a baffling business.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PORTRAIT.

How it came about that I was a full happy week at Greenfields before I found my way into the drawing-room, is hard to say. Probably it had been due to a certain sense of courtesy, since Phillida had made some apology at the outset of my visit for treating me as one of the family.

"In winter I—we prefer the smoking-room and boudoir. They are cosier than the large drawing-room."

And, in response, I had eagerly proclaimed the smoker's preference for a small retreat.

Possibly Elizabeth's absurd remark about the ill-omened qualities of Esmé's portrait may have, subconsciously, led me to give it a wide berth.

But, in the end, it was captious curiosity to see this very picture that drew me to the drawing-room on a wet Sunday afternoon; nominally in search of a certain copy of 'Gulliver's Travels'

which I remembered used to live in a book-case beside the wide window-seat.

As Phillida had maintained a rigid silence about Esmé's portrait, it was with something of the daredevil sense of a naughty child peering into a forbidden cupboard that I turned the handle of the door, to look at the picture which Kellerman's brush had made famous among the Academy portraits of that year. Not for the first time, mind you. For, though the Mahlun expedition had deprived me of the chance during its exhibition that spring, I had seen it in Italy, some fifteen years ago, before the painter had added his last finishing touches. It had, then, struck me as the finest thing Kellerman had yet put his hand to. I said so, at the time, to the painter himself, and found him ready to agree. Yet was I unprepared for the impression it produced, hung to advantage in a north light, on the left of the great white Adams' mantelpiece. Such a setting as the Greenfields drawing-room was calculated to do full justice to the art of the painter—and his subject.

A white panelled room—sparsely set with furniture—the west windows framed in a deep embrasure. There it hung, flanked by broad settees and facing a tallboy of Georgian dimensions. The heavy maroon draperies of Lady Fane's day had been replaced by rep curtains of a deep

orange shade; and the severely calendered chintz of pomegranate pattern, by a striped yellow cretonne, which gave an effect of flecked sunlight through the lofty spaces of the room. A chandelier (now concealing electric bulbs in its cut-glass hangings) still glittered from the ceiling as of yore. Polished floors and Persian rugs had replaced the well-worn Brussels carpet that was the friend of my youth.

As a boy I had made a practice, on a Sunday morning, of counting the sprays of conventional roses designed upon it whensoever the General (with obvious discomfort) read family prayers. On week-days they were held in the dining-room, Lady Fane presiding, with calm composure; I had almost said with unction! The General's lack of ease over the same task was discernible, even to my childish perceptions. This led me to adopt a studied air of inattention which, I fondly imagined, lent itself to the General's relief. To prevent my thoughts wandering to the poor performer and his somewhat halting delivery of the Bible lesson, I religiously counted the roses; and became conversant, in consequence, with the disturbances which the feet of two generations had made in the colour and pattern of many a rose spray.

But I have wandered away from the picture that had drawn me into the room.

Not thus did my eyes wander that day as I stood riveted before the magic semblance of Esmé in the character of a wood nymph, her lilac scarf afloat upon a summer breeze—a breeze that was playing among the tendrils of her hair, escaped from the fillet that bound them, the rest looped in a Grecian knot at the back of her head. Her light fawn-like movements were so subtly conveyed as to suggest actual motion. In effect, the eager restless being that was Esmé brought to life again. The pearl-like pallor of one of the fairest faces ever limned by painter's brush. The deep unfathomable mystery of eyes—dewy with the morning freshness of a child's,—yet shadowed by sudden sadness, as though, like Botticelli's Venus, she were grieving over the sorrow she was doomed to bring upon all who should cross her path.

Those eyes! Were they grey or blue? Changeable as the skies of the Emerald Isle which gave her birth—who should say? Yet who could forget the pathos they contained—a pathos that drew the hearts of men to her feet, and held them there mercilessly, even when they had discovered that the liquid tenderness of those eyes lay no deeper than the tangle of curling lashes that veiled them. For that hovering glance, which brooded, sad and sweet, in maidenly aloofness, could claim more than one victim never yet

ensnared by women's wiles. Philip Fane, for instance, who had so sternly held aloof from the web of the wanton.

It seemed sacrilege now, as it did then, to use such terms in the presence of so much innocent loveliness. For who could imagine that the mind which belonged to that dream-like face and ethereal form was unalterably centred and fixed upon herself—that it occupied itself entirely with things terrestrial; and yet at four-and-thirty—wife and mother—still displayed the artless innocence of a maiden of eighteen. Was it the magic of the witch weaving her spell? Or the lost soul of some luckless Undine that looked through Esmé's eyes upon the world?

Ask me not! I have never found an answer to the riddle of this fair being. Looking on her likeness, I could almost excuse Elizabeth her fantasy of a spell by which, even through this picture, Esmé's power could sway the imagination, not merely of men, but of a woman like Phillida, or a child like Michael. Some magic, beyond the skill of Kellerman's brush, or the colours blended upon his palette.

How long I stood entranced I know not, before I became aware of a flutter, a sigh!

Turning, I found Phillida beside me.

"How excessively fascinating she must have

been!" were the words that escaped from her, as though scarcely conscious she had given voice to her thoughts.

"Excessive! Yes, that is the word! The *only* word! There was an excess in her fascination that, I suppose, produced . . . in consequence . . . a lack . . ." I paused.

"Lack—lack of what?" The strained eagerness in Phillida's tone startled me, since curiosity was assuredly not one of her failings.

Clearly I had been forgetting myself.

"Lack—well, lack of—common-sense—for one thing," I answered in lame fashion, and laughed uncomfortably, feeling I had been drawn on to the very subject that I had always tried to avoid discussing with Barry's second wife.

"Neither you nor Dick have ever seemed able to give me any idea of her!" Phillida persisted.

"There—you have her—to the life!"

"Yes—her beauty—and that strange appealing wistfulness—but her character?"

"I found the same difficulty in her lifetime as you do now in trying to read it—from the canvas," said I, brought to bay.

"Oh, really!" Phillida paused, on a perplexed note. "Yet Dick is like her—you said so before in Corner Street."

"In some things, yes. He has certainly the same lack—of simplicity——"

"Lack of simplicity! Why, she looks as simple as a child—there!"

"Perhaps—but it is from *her* that Dick gets his furtive way of taking what he wants." At all costs, I would clear Barry of any responsibility for Dick's stealthiness.

"Furtive!" repeated Phillida thoughtfully. "Do you mean you consider Dick lacking in —in courage?"

"Not in courage, perhaps—but lacking in directness of speech and action."

After a pause she said slowly, "I think want of frankness generally comes from want of courage. If she lacked courage, she must have been very unlike her cousin, Major Gordon. . . . Yet they are wonderfully alike—in their features, I mean. I suppose that is why Dick reminds me so—of *him*."

"They were very strongly alike in appearance, and I certainly thought them alike—in other ways."

For the life of me I could not keep a certain contempt out of my tone when I noticed the reverence with which she handled his name, and I thought how apt she was to criticise a man with whom Frank could ill bear comparison.

"Moral courage is so different from the other thing," I added lamely.

" Have you the same dislike as Barry has to—to speaking of—Major Gordon ? "

Before I had time to make any reply there came the well-known patter of feet at the door, and a small voice piped " Mummy ! " as though in fear to enter.

Phillida started. " I'm coming, darling ; wait there for me," she called to the boy ; then to me in a low voice she flung back the words, " Michael has a strange dread of that picture. I can't understand why," and was gone.

That afternoon as the child sat alone with me in the smoking-room, while I was enjoying a cigarette, he suddenly put his arms round my neck and whispered, " I want to tell you a secwet. There's a fairly what sits in the eyes of the lady in the dworn-loom. Did you see it ? It makes me want to cwy, 'cos I think she's lost her way, and I'd like to help her find it ; but Dick says it's 'cos she's angwy wif me for having Daddy, and lat one day she'll take him away. He says I mustn't tell Mummy, so I don't, but it fwightens me when I'm in bed. Sometimes I want to go down at night to see if she's still lere—'cos if she went away Daddy would never come back—Dick says so."

" But, Michael, she can't take Daddy away ; she's only a picture."

"But her fairly can. 'Sides, she's Dick's Mummy, and he says she always does what he wants."

"That's only Dick's nonsense, Michael; his Mummy's dead."

"Dick's Mummy's in heaven, and 'Lisbeth says the people what lives in heaven can do *juss* as they like."

The awful finality of his last remark reduced me to silence. I was fairly stumped by such theology. Furious, too, at such a stab in the back from Dick. He was clearly out to wound the parents through the child.

"Look here, Michael," I said at last, "don't listen to Dick. Daddy would never leave you and Mummy."

"But—len why does Daddy keep goin' away?"

"Only to look after sick people who want him to make them well."

He climbed into my lap then.

"But I want Daddy, too, to make *me* well. Somesing hurts me inside when he's not here."

"He'll soon be back, old chap, never fear; nobody can keep him away for long, not sick people nor even a lost lady."

"If le picture lady doesn't take Daddy away I don't mind nofing—not even when Dick and Matty's angwy with me. Ley's always angwy

with me now. P'waps the lost lady tells them to be."

"Nonsense, Michael; don't bother your head about such stuff."

"I don't—only—sometimes . . . in the dark."

Those beastly children! I inwardly cursed Frank and all the Dundarrans.

CHAPTER XXII.

MATTY.

THAT evening, after dinner, to prevent further talk about the portrait, I asked for music, and Phillida gave me a delicious time with Chopin.

It was not till the parlour-maid brought in the syphons and hot milk that she announced the fact of her expecting Matty next day.

"It's her half-term holiday. She's been spending it with a friend in London, and has written to-day to propose giving us a night . . . really in order to see you!" She smiled indulgently. "She's leaving school at the end of this term—before she is seventeen—in order to take up music."

"Oh, indeed," I murmured. "Is that her fate."

"I don't like the idea of her leaving so early," Phillida went on deliberately, after the usual pause. "But she is quite determined; and the scenes she has had with Miss Venables about it

have, at last, made the good lady ask Barry to remove her. That's how Matty gets her way. She is more difficult to manage than Dick, in spite of what you call his furtiveness, or, perhaps, because of it."

I remembered Matty on Phillida's wedding day —a tumultuous edition of Esmé, minus her charm, and I could imagine the combination would be unpleasant to deal with when opposed.

But I was not prepared for the self-possessed young woman, who blew me a kiss from the pony-cart on her arrival. She was driving herself, having sent her luggage ahead in the car.

"Rotten thing a car!" she greeted me. "A pony's worth a dozen cars. I suppose that's my Irish blood coming out. I've just been learning to drive."

I could imagine it. The pony did not look very happy.

After several futile jerks she induced the poor bewildered beast to stand still on the drive where Michael and I had been watching for her arrival. Elizabeth had left the boy with me till Phillida was ready to take him in the pony-trap to a small lake hard by, where some boy scouts were having a swimming competition.

Meantime the car had been sent for Matty— and the trap for certain bags of crop manure— at the station. These had arrived in the car

some ten minutes earlier behind an angry and apologetic chauffeur, who explained "that it was none of his doing. That Miss Matty would have it so."

He inferred that there had been somewhat of an altercation on the platform.

"Ah!" muttered Elizabeth *sotto voce.* "Trust Miss Matty to upset orders."

Before Matty had time to alight, Michael darted to the pony's head, a lump of sugar in his hand.

"Don't try to feed the pony, you silly kid. Give the sugar to me. He'll only bite your fingers."

"I give 'Tumbles' sugar evely day. Mummy lets me. He loves me."

The pony had decided the point before Matty was out of the cart.

Seeing the girl had no idea of shaking hands with me I turned to light a fresh cigarette. The next moment I heard a sharp smack and a cry. I wheeled round in time to see Michael, his hand upon his ear, silently struggling with a burst of tears.

It was then that the tall full form of Elizabeth strode on to the drive. Having clearly witnessed the whole THING, without hesitation or warning she seized Matty by the arm and shook her fiercely.

" How dare you ! " she cried.

" How dare *you*, you hell cat," shrieked the girl in a fury.

I longed to clear out, but my cowardly impulse was checked by the look in poor Elizabeth's face. She was obviously repenting her of her rage.

" I don't wonder at a nurse jumping on you, Matty," I said. " I should have done the same. You might have damaged that boy's hearing for life."

" Oh ! *you've* joined the chorus of Michael worshippers, have you ? " She turned from me to rage again at Elizabeth. " I shall write and tell my father and get you sacked, so there ! "

" You can write to fifty fathers," was Elizabeth's spirited reply.

" I shall complain to Phee, too. My arm's all black and blue. If you want to fly out like that, pitch into the boy. He wants a dressing down."

Michael, after a stifled sob, had stood silent, his cheeks crimson from Matty's blow. At that moment Phillida appeared.

" What's wrong, Elizabeth ? " she said with a judicial air.

Mrs Ben gave a straightforward account of the fracas, and before Matty could let loose a torrent of words, I forestalled her by saying, " Elizabeth had every justification. Boxing little children's

ears is most dangerous and an unpardonable liberty."

"Rot!" cried Matty, still in a temper. "It was merely a smack. The kid wants smacking, and if nobody else will do the job, I'll jolly well see that he gets it." She turned enraged eyes upon Michael.

The small boy stood his ground.

"I'd have hitted you back, only I'm a boy, so I can't. 'Tumbles' is *my* pony, and I can feed him if I like."

"*Your* pony? He's no more yours than mine; I told you not to feed him; I'll learn you to obey me." She shook her fist at him, mockery and malice in her eyes.

Surely only the Quaker in Phillida could have held her silent through this.

I wondered, looking at her, whether that cold glance of her eye held anger in leash. Her white eyelids drooped more than usual—a habit of hers, I remembered, when things went contrary.

"Really, Matty, this is going too far," she said at length. "A girl of your upbringing to stoop to this."

I could see that the easy sisterly attitude was gone. Phillida spoke as the mother and mistress of a household. Matty's repentant moods were also clearly a thing of the past. The girl, though petite, looked a woman both in expression and

bearing. Phillida, with all her dignity, had the more girlish aspect of the two. Matty's mien bespoke entire freedom from youthful illusions and youthful dreams ; she was " entirely modern," as we say nowadays — " quite a woman of the world," the Victorians would have phrased it.

Her red hair, now fashionably shingled, framed a small face with a pointed chin. Brown eyes, bright and bold, looked out from below beetle brows and long black lashes. Her looks, though still somewhat forbidding, were certainly effective. Not a vestige of her mother could I trace till later, when that evening, the cloud removed from her brow, she descended to dinner in a scarlet wisp of a garment, displaying faultless legs and ankles. The latest vagary in scarlet shoes caught the red lights of her burnished hair in a very telling manner.

A brilliant smile and lithe movements were clearly her stock-in-trade. But the mysterious sadness that enveloped Esmé like an aura was altogether lacking in Matty.

Vanity and vulgarity, too, often invaded a certain gaiety of demeanour—a trick of manner I have found to be part of the modern school finish, just as demureness had been the veneer supplied by the early Victorian schools.

After dinner Matty carried on an easy flow of small talk—quite smart, if somewhat too slangy,

for my taste. Phillida's lack of this modern acquirement naturally relegated her to the background.

Yes, without a doubt, Matty shone that evening. She was decidedly entertaining—an excellent mimic. In short, it was difficult to believe she was the same creature as the vixen of the morning.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DICK'S *COUP D'ÉTAT*.

To the relief of everyone, Matty took her departure next day. She left in the same obstreperous manner as she had elected to come. Phillida happened to be out that morning, visiting a sick pensioner.

No sooner was she gone than Matty insisted on taking 'Tumbles' for a ride, thus deliberately missing her train, to the indignation of the whole household, including the chauffeur and groom.

To me it appeared clear that the girl was simply bent on upsetting the servants directly their mistress's back was turned. Elizabeth, however, took another view of the matter.

"It's just to madden the little master," she said; and she may have been right, for I saw Michael watching her in helpless fury at the front door, while she bullied the poor pony all the way up the drive, flicking him senselessly with her whip while she peered at Michael.

"It's all your fault; you've spoilt him with your kiddish petting; now I've got to give him a taste of the whip to bring him into line again."

I saw and heard it all from the smoking-room window, and only forbore to interfere then and there lest Matty should vent her spite further on pony and boy.

I had just turned away to relight a cigarette when I heard a piteous shriek of pain. Michael! I hurried to the front door, where I met Elizabeth.

"Is he hurt?" I asked.

"The dear knows," she exclaimed. "I only left him one minute, sir, to fetch 'is 'at—the sun's that 'ot."

We found them at the front door. Matty had dismounted, and was bending over Michael—propped on the doorstep—a little dazed; clearly too miserable to speak.

"It's his own fault," exclaimed Matty when she caught sight of us. "He barged into me while I was giving this vicious beast a lesson." ('Tumbles' was standing close by like a lamb.)

"He might have been killed, rushing like that at the pony's head, if I hadn't shoved him off——"

"She—she——" stammered Michael, still looking wretchedly green and holding his head.

"Where does it hurt you, my lamb?"

Elizabeth was beside him with a glass of water,

looking daggers at Matty, too angry to trust herself with speech.

"Leave him alone. He's all right."

The girl was for elbowing Elizabeth aside.

"He ought to be jolly grateful I saved him from a kick from 'Tumbles,' and now he will only go and split to Phillida and get me into trouble—I know him."

"I don't *never* spit—and I won't say nuffin' to Mummy—'t least—not if you pwomise you'll never do lat to 'Tumbles' adain." His lip quivered. (It did not appear what *that* was.)

"All right, I'll promise, you silly kid; but remember it's a bargain. Don't you forget!"

"And—don't you forget." The child raised his head for the first time, flushing scarlet.

"Trust me!" laughed Matty. "But I must be off now—I shall catch it in town if I miss another train." She was off to the garage, and five minutes later the chauffeur was driving her to the station.

"Praise be!" exclaimed Ben, as he shut the gate upon her. It was the first complete sentence I had heard from him since my arrival.

I echoed his thankfulness, especially as Michael, though still pale and shaken, declared—

"It doesn't hurt now; I only feel funny ways." And nothing more could Elizabeth or I draw from him.

The wise woman made him lie down all the afternoon, and two hours after he met his mother in high spirits. No word of the mishap passed his lips. The morning mishap seemed forgotten, and I was glad Phillida had been spared the scene —spared, too, Matty's flippant remark to me on saying good-bye, a remark that poisoned the pleasure of my visit.

I came down next morning with a real sense of relief. Breakfast was always a particularly cheerful event at Greenfields, Michael appearing half-way through the meal.

The view from the dining-room window framed a landscape that was typically English: a stretch of pasture-land with a background of undulating country. It was a happy inspiration which led some ancestor of the Fanes to fix on this bit of rising ground for the Manor House, so as to command a view at once of hill and dale. That morning I found a certain poignant pleasure watching the rolling clouds ride triumphantly above the outline of purple hills in the distance while Phillida made the coffee.

After my recent experiences in Rubalmania, I was moved to murmur, "What's wrong with England?"

It was at that moment the post appeared.

Among my lot I caught sight of the one I had been looking for every morning since I came. I pounced on it with the conventional apology.

Eve at last!

Here was the long-looked-for welcome. But the first sentence dashed my hopes to the ground and changed my perspective. A runaway match between Dick and Ruth—by all that was damnable!

Eve wrote distractedly: "I have not seen or heard anything of the two since Barry went to meet you in Paris on your return from the Russian border. Ten days ago I wrote to Ruth inviting her and Dick here together, as her last letter, touring in the Provinces, rather alarmed me. That is why I put off your visit, as I didn't want you mixed up in this mess. Ruth is the soul of honesty, as you know. Dick must have enslaved her rather badly before she could act like this. Neither Barry nor I have had a chance of influencing Dick himself since his quarrel with Phillida. Do try and get that fool of a woman to see the importance of recognising this foolish step and seeing it in the best light. She has largely brought it about by her own attitude. First, she forbade Dick to ask Ruth to Greenfields, and then she practically bribed him to keep clear of the girl. It is really because of Phillida Ruth feels justified in taking this headlong plunge. Indeed, she actually compares it, poor child, with Phillida's hasty marriage, being too young to see that *her* money and position made all the difference. If

only the stupid creature had not taken up such an early Victorian view of the stage, things would have been easier."

Deserting my breakfast and hot coffee, I had walked to the window.

"Is anything wrong? No bad news, I hope," came from Phillida.

I wheeled round and burst the bare facts upon her as she sat there ready to lend a sympathetic ear to my troubles. But at the news itself her whole expression changed. Cold steel flashed in her eyes under their drooping lids. I was both chilled and repelled.

Had she but lost her temper as I did mine, a moment after, exploding at length with a muttered oath, followed by the customary apology; had she only fired up and joined forces with me in a good grouse, I could have felt some measure of relief. Fellowship in wrath is often the best plaster to a sore heart. But it was in silence she received my news.

"Eve is not to blame for this."

I flared up as if in contradiction to some unspoken criticism, for I was acutely annoyed by this maddening silence.

Phillida did find voice at last. "I am not altogether surprised," she said, but it was as though she had picked her words out of a refrigerator. "I did my best to prevent this catastrophe, but

it's too late now. . . . If Dick talks of coming down here, I really must ask *you*, Colonel Carmichael, to stay—in Barry's absence. I don't feel I could deal with this matter on my own. You are his godfather, aren't you ? "

The idea of Phillida not being equal to deal with anything she chose to tackle amused me inwardly. That she of all women should fall back upon my superior, or rather inferior, resources in dealing with such a situation as this struck me as singularly inappropriate. I, who have never been utilised by my family save for bottle-washing purposes, or as a companion for the odd man out, to be asked at such a moment, point-blank, to handle the ticklish business of a runaway match was really too much ! In fact, an honour to which I was neither born nor bred.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

After shutting myself into the library, I proceeded to announce the news of the morning to Barry in a letter, bidding him come home as early as his Continental job would allow.

To Eve I wrote my sympathy at some length. She loved Ruth, and the fact of her being sacrificed to Dick would hurt her badly, I knew. I wrote more hopefully than I felt as to his possessing qualities which should develop well in a husband, being secretly filled with remorse now that I had the clue to her tantalising silence, and realised the cause of it—her gallant attempt to keep me out of this horrid mess.

At the moment I could not bring myself to speak to Phillida.

While she remained an icicle, I felt it was impossible for us to discuss matters to anyone's advantage.

So I went for a prowl with my gun to try and

straighten things out in my own mind. The glamour of the place was strong upon me as I made my way through the copse. The nip of frost in the morning air, the beech-woods—a riot of colour against the blue sky,—the rich carpet of fallen leaves along the woodland path for a mile or more.

What a country for a man, no longer young, to live and die in. It amazed me to think that Barry could stick at this Continental job, now that the war was over, instead of leaving that sort of thing to the younger generation. Here was work and to spare with this goodly estate at his hand to manage in company with such a wife as Phillida—and a boy like Michael—only needing brothers and sisters of his own to make life complete for him and to oust these cuckoos who were despoiling the nest.

Barry was never one to desert a difficult task, yet to me he seemed to have been driven from the situation by Dick's pin-pricks. Perhaps Elizabeth had found the key to his constant absence—or Ben might be right. Barry certainly had a faculty for living on a high plane out of the din and dust of the market-place.

Oh, for an hour of Eve, to thrash things out with her and find myself in the wrong!

An hour later, my head clearer and my body braced, I returned to the house, and, stepping

into the gun-room, was greeted by a ghostly face, which I could hardly recognise as Elizabeth's.

She had been clearly awaiting my return, and was like a thing distraught.

"Go into the drawing-room, sir, I beg of you," she said. "And don't delay! The worst has come."

"Steady the Buffs, Elizabeth, and tell me what the worst is before I try to face it!"

"It's that wicked woman, sir, Maria Meadstone, that was maid to the doctor's first wife. She's forced her way into my lady's presence with her tale of Master Dick as the captain's son. Oh! go—go, sir, I implore you. You may be able to stop her tongue. *I* should only make matters worse. I've done all I could for three years—and failed. I see now money's no use where there's an evil spirit at work." She seemed to be beside herself, faint with fright and fatigue.

Looking at her poor grey face, I exclaimed—

"For God's sake, my good Elizabeth, don't worry yourself like that. Nothing's easier for me than to send this woman about her business."

I waited till I saw the blood returning to her cheeks, and then repaired to the drawing-room.

The door was ajar. I heard a thin shrill voice speaking in a bullying tone, and caught the words, "You had best make terms."

Then Phillida's voice struck, cold and deliberate—

"Terms—what terms? I simply want to know the truth. I am perfectly ready to make way for the rightful owner of this place, be he who he may!"

I entered.

So lifelike was Esmé's portrait that there actually appeared to be three people in the room.

Phillida's face, which was dyed scarlet, paled at my entrance. I looked carefully at the intruder—a sandy-haired woman of uncertain age. She stood beside the girl like a cat ready to spring. I could not recall having ever seen her, but she appeared to recognise an enemy in me, for she glanced towards the passage as though meditating flight; then paused, clearly suspicious that someone might be lurking outside.

I placed myself between her and the door, and addressing Phillida, said, "I hope I am not intruding——"

"You are, sir," snapped the woman before Phillida had time to answer. "I am here on private business with . . . this lady——"

"And *I* am commissioned by her husband to assist her over any business during his absence," I parried, in response to the mute entreaty in Phillida's eyes.

"Oh, indeed!"

There was a world of hideous meaning in her tone, but Phillida remained unmoved. Her lids merely dropped further over her eyes. She might have been a statue, less animated than the portrait beside which she stood.

The woman moistened her lips, as though to give herself time to frame a reply. Then she snarled at me: "This affair concerns only Captain Fane's family. I am here in the interests of Mr Richard Fane, who has been done out of his rights."

"Who is Richard Fane?" I asked sarcastically.

"This lady's stepson. He is also her half-brother."

"That's a lie!"

"I am not accustomed to such language, sir."

"I am sorry, but I am in the habit of speaking plain English. Richard O'Neill being my godson, I can speak with authority."

Mrs Meadstone again moistened her lips before saying, with a touch of insolence, "The lady *there*," pointing to the portrait, "should surely be the one to know best, and I had the facts from her."

Again, so vivid was the sense of Esmé's presence that this woman seemed merely her mouthpiece. I could have cursed Kellerman's art! Phillida spoke at last—

"This is Mrs Meadstone," she said. The words seemed dragged from her. "We lived in her house at Seastone for three months. She said nothing of all this then. She has now come to tell me that Esmé Dundarran and my father were secretly married, and that Dick is their son."

"You should have had the news long ago," snapped the woman; then looked as if she would like to recall her words.

"Of course, you've brought the certificate of this marriage?" I asked with withering scorn, while I tried to gather my wits together.

Barry and I had never even spoken to each other of Esmé's secret—of Frank's intrigue—of Barry's fathering of Dick. But Philip Fane! The story was a lie on the face of it—Dick himself proclaimed his parentage—doubly a Dundarran.

I studied the woman's face; every line of it proclaimed craft and cunning.

"Surely this should come as no surprise to the Hon. James Carmichael." She turned to Phillida. "*I* can remember, it cost him Captain Fane's friendship, for a gentleman like the master of Greenfields"—then turning to me—"rightly resented your attentions to his wife."

Where had this woman picked up such a hideously garbled edition of the truth?

"Good God! Was this Esmé's version of the rift between Philip and me on her account?

Phillida's lids drooped still further over her eyes. She seemed to be shutting out the horror before her; every feature hardened. Curses leapt to my lips, but controlling my temper, I said, "Captain Fane died in my arms at Magersfontein. Our friendship was lifelong; what I did not know about Philip Fane was not worth knowing."

It was really to Phillida that I spoke, and it was good to see the veiled lids suddenly raised, the light of thankfulness in her eyes.

Again I saw the impulse to flight flickering in Mrs Meadstone's eyes.

"Does Mr Richard O'Neill know of your coming here?" I demanded.

"He does, and he doesn't," was the cryptic answer. "Yesterday I happened to meet—his wife. P'raps you do not know he is married?" with a detestable smile.

"Yes, we actually do," I answered with a drawl, determined this wretch should not succeed in rousing my temper again.

"Oh! I'm glad they've made no secret of it. Secret marriages are always a mistake, but Mr Richard is ready to help in procuring all the necessary proofs of his mother's marriage with the captain. It will take time."

I could stand it no longer. "I should try the police," I drawled.

In one moment the furtive look of flight became concentrated. She was too quick for me. She actually slipped past before I could have believed that she had moved.

And scarcely a moment after Elizabeth's face appeared in the doorway.

"Took to 'er 'eels this time!" she said. "Put to flight like the armies of Israel, as you might say."

"Never mind the armies of Israel, Elizabeth! But get hold of Ben. Let him inform the police, and get the woman detained by the time she gets to the station. Ben will do the job with the fewest words, I know."

"Station, sir—she'd never use a station, as decent folks do. She's got that there bicycle of hers knocking about in the bushes, I'll be bound. But you're right in sayin' Ben's the man. 'E can allus nip in smart, if 'e can't 'urry up with 'is speech."

With that she left us, and Phillida turned to me.

Never at any time had I seen her outward calm desert her. But now she was quivering as she seized my arm.

"Tell me the truth—for the love of God! Tell me the truth . . . about my father!"

"My dear girl, you don't need me to tell you that your father was an honourable man. That

beast of a woman has put her slimy foot on ground that should never be trodden upon after a man's death—save in defence of his honour."

"But—there must be some truth in it. Did he ever love that girl?" Phillida spoke breathlessly.

"He—worshipped her, as we worship the angels," I said. "She was always at her best with him, till it happened that one day—the lack I spoke of—betrayed itself. He found he had been worshipping . . . a graven image. It came as a great shock. He never saw her again."

"But did *she* care for him?"

"Yes; as far as she cared for anyone."

"But—Barry?"

"I am speaking . . . of a time before she married Barry."

"She must have suffered, too, then?"

"She did suffer—and determined that your father should suffer also. Hence this woman's lies——"

"But—did she start the lie——?" (pointing at the portrait).

"My dear girl—don't ask me. Esmé Dundarran belonged to a family whose standards—well . . . they and her upbringing were a contrast to your father's, at any rate."

"But—I don't understand—she was a cousin of Frank Gordon's?"

As she spoke of him, her face flushed with the expression of pride and reverence I knew so well.

"I refuse to discuss Frank Gordon—*he* was no friend of mine."

"But I hope—you did not share Barry's dislike of him?"

Again this question.

"I disliked Frank Gordon," I blurted out, "and I could never have treated him with the forbearance Barry did. I cannot pretend to *his* generosity of mind."

"I am sure you don't do yourself justice."

Under ordinary circumstances the girl's obvious gratitude would have pleased and touched me. At the moment it only irritated. For it savoured somehow of disloyalty to her husband.

"Barry ought to have told me about all this in the past—before he married me I had a right to know."

"Phillida!" I exclaimed, "what nonsense. Barry himself was both ignorant and innocent. Besides, the generation that your father and I belonged to—that Barry belongs to—have always lived to shelter our women, if we could . . . certainly such women as you, from any touch of evil—even from talk of it."

"But truth is truth, however ugly. It is the one thing that matters."

I moved away. There was nothing more to say.

The cameo sternness had returned to the girl's face again.

"It *is* the one thing that matters to me—at any rate," she repeated deliberately.

She was adamant. There was no more hesitation in Phillida's mind than in her speech. She had no doubts to make her falter in her judgments. She saw no half-lights. Things were clearly black or white to her.

My heart sank as I thought what such an attitude of mind might involve for Barry, should the veil of the past be rent asunder. She would be incapable of recognising the tragedy of a choice such as his, incapable of distinguishing between two truths, or of recognising the noble nature of a decision which chose the way of sacrifice.

There we stood together in silence—his wife and I,—each wrapped in our own thoughts, before the portrait of the woman who had brought so much tragedy into the lives of others, in the effort to slip out of tragedy herself—this beautiful Esmé, who was essentially her own tragedy, and whose evil had been destined to live after her.

Thus had we stood for many minutes when the sound of Elizabeth's voice broke in upon us—

"I'm that worried about Master Michael, my lady. Can I send for the doctor? He's turned queer quite sudden."

CHAPTER XXV.

MICHAEL AND THE LOST LADY.

WHAT steps we might have taken to track Mrs Meadstone and deliver her up to justice will never be known, since no sooner had she taken to flight than all our minds were turned to tracking another kind of evil.

Something was amiss with Michael.

He, who never ailed, had wakened that morning, after a night of troubled dreams, to complain of his eyes and his head. The usual nursery remedies having failed to bring relief, Elizabeth had become seriously alarmed.

"If it 'ad been the summer, I'd 'ave judged it a touch of the sun, seein' as 'ow he's for ever putting 'is little 'ands to 'is head."

The doctor, a locum, came within the hour.

He was clearly puzzled, and refused to commit himself in any way. It was more his manner than anything he said that led me on my own responsibility to wire to Barry. If my letter

about Dick's runaway marriage did not hasten his return, the words "Michael ill" would surely do so. Phillida herself seemed incapable of envisaging a danger that was neither voiced nor labelled, and neither Elizabeth nor I saw fit to enlighten her before it became necessary.

Want of sleep was the main trouble with Michael.

That night snow fell, not only on the moors but within the Vale. It lay, too, some inches deep upon the open road. The beech avenue made a brilliant picture, draped in a delicate white mantilla, through which the scattered remnant of its autumn glory gleamed like rubies in a setting of snow.

But at the moment the sight brought nothing but dread. What if the snowstorm should delay a journey across France or hold up the Dover boat?

The evening brought a wire—"Coming, Barry."

I showed it to Phillida.

"Was it necessary to frighten him?" she asked.

"He has a right to know the boy is ill, surely," I said, irritated now by her coolness.

"Yes, yes, that's true," she admitted. "It was good of you to think of it. . . . Dr Findes did suggest it . . . but it seemed useless to write till he could tell us what was wrong."

The doctor had been twice that day, looking each time graver and more perplexed.

" That's a mercy," he exclaimed when I showed him Barry's wire next morning. " A doctor, did you say? Not Barry O'Neill, the great nerve specialist? Good Lord! To think how I've longed for a chance of meeting him! Queer it should come this way. His own boy, too!"

Michael's sleeplessness was the dragon they were fighting. The cause of it still remained a mystery.

It was Armistice Day. I had arranged to spend it as usual with Eve in London. I wondered if Phillida remembered it was her own wedding day.

" You won't desert us, will you?" she asked almost humbly, when the question of my going to town was raised. She had begun to be anxious herself by that time.

The doctor's final words to Elizabeth that morning were significant: " Remember, only one person in the room at a time—we must not take any risks—the boy's brain's too active." It was the first time he had used the dread word ' brain.'

I saw Phillida flinch.

Barry arrived two hours later. He went straight up to the nursery where Michael lay asleep, at the moment under the influence of a drug. Then he 'phoned to the doctor, and the two were

closeted together for an hour. I watched Barry's face when he joined us again, but it revealed nothing. The doctor rose triumphant over the father—save for a strange look in the eyes that recalled the efforts of a blind man groping for a ray of light, his manner was his usual one in a crisis. The 'frowns and fidgets' stage had clearly passed. It was simply 'orders' with him —sharp and short—no drawing a word of comment from him. In the regiment we augured things were at their worst then.

Michael's cry of "Daddy" when he woke from a troubled dream and found Barry beside him was an unforgettable thing. I saw Phillida wince as we both sat together outside the open door behind the screen, where she waited her turn.

All that day the child clung to his father's hand, holding it fast in his small hot one.

"I muss hold you tight, 'cos if I didn't, you would run away!"

"No, no, son; trust me. I am here now for good and all."

"Does lat mean always?"

"Yes, always."

"Len I can sleep safe."

A few minutes later that for which we had laboured in vain was granted—the blessed boon of sleep.

Behind the screen we peeped, Phillida and I,

Elizabeth being within on guard by the fire. We two crept away on tiptoe with a lift of the heart.

Then followed two hours of quiet sleep, the little brain no longer busy with a tangle of ideas —the fairies, Esmé's picture, Matty, and 'Tumbles.' All seemed mercifully blotted out by his father's presence.

But at one o'clock the child woke with a start —evidently delirious. Phillida had by then taken Barry's place by the bedside, for about midnight the exhausted man had fallen forward in a faint, and but for Elizabeth might have roused the sleeping child. Only, weeks after, did we learn that on getting the wire in the Vosges, he had ridden thirty miles at a hand-gallop, no car being available. Elizabeth and I got him on to a sofa just outside the nursery door, and a stiff tot of brandy brought him round.

"Sleeping still, is he?" were his first words when he came to. Then, reassured, he merely muttered, "Overdid it a bit—riding—these cursed cars will be the ruin of us, body and soul." Then he turned over, and with a "Call me when he wakes, old chap," fell into a sound sleep.

Glancing at Phillida from behind the screen, I wondered what her calm unruffled brow betokened. Was her mind at the moment capable of naught save relief at the sight of Michael

sleeping peacefully? Had she any space in her thoughts for the father? Did she realise how forcibly this night had disclosed the fact that, with the child, Barry held first place?

An hour or so elapsed before I heard a stir. Then a small voice murmured, "Mummy! I'se been 'sleep—where's Daddy?" The voice grew shrill with fear.

"He's here, Michael, close by—sleeping. He's tired, poor Daddy. You sleep, too."

"But—but—le lost lady 'll be coming to fetch him away."

Phillida had clearly no clue to this trouble—it was nonsense to her.

"Don't be silly, Michael," she said with a touch of sternness; "lie still like a good boy and don't talk."

There was silence again, save for Elizabeth's movements as she heated something by the fire. The small voice again—

"Lisbet, I can't say s'ank you, 'cos I mustn't talk."

"No, my lamb. There! Drink it all up. Now—sleep your sleep out, and you'll wake as right as a trivet."

"What's a twivet?"

An audible sigh escaped from Phillida. To keep this small brain quiescent in his father's absence was a problem indeed.

Four o'clock struck.

I must have dozed off again for some time, for when next I roused all the clocks in the house were striking seven. As of old, Greenfields clocks kept in accord: the grandfather's clock made the start, the little cuckoo clock in the drawing-room still bringing up the rear with a musical chorus of Amens. From the landing I could see the faint reflection of the night-light on the ceiling and the glow of the embers in the grate, where Elizabeth slept as only nurses *can* sleep—with an eye and an ear cocked on the patient.

Once more came the small voice of Michael, clearly restless in the unwonted atmosphere of early dawn.

"I can't sleep, Mummy; it's so dark. When will the day be?"

"Soon, Michael, very soon."

"What's lat funny light on the blind, Mummy?"

"The dawn, dear; it will soon be breaking. Hush now."

"What bweaks the door?"

"The sun, Michael. The dawn of the day—but sleep now, dear, before it comes——"

"But I want to see le sun bleaking the door of to-day." His voice rose shrill and insistent.

"Not now, Michael; you must sleep while Daddy sleeps." But the touch of sternness in

Phillida's voice failed to soothe, and at the sound of his father's name the old fear returned in treble force. He was soon delirious again.

"Lere's Daddy—look—I see him—at the blind—le lost lady is taking him away. Help! Two twins!"

"Be quiet, Michael; Daddy's not gone. He is here."

There was a gasp—a struggle—then a voice that was not recognisable as Phillida's cried, "Barry!" It reached the ears of the sleeping man. In one second he was beside the bed. I stood at the door and saw Phillida holding down the child—wild-eyed with terror—his arms outstretched. The next moment he was in his father's grasp, his senses soothed by the magic hands that held him.

Still his mind wandered. "Matty," he whispered, "can I tell Daddy? You only said not Mummy—I want to tell him it wasn't 'Tumbles' but you—knocked me over. Daddy wouldn't be cross wis you."

Elizabeth and I exchanged glances—she by the fireside and I in the doorway.

. . . . . .

Thus at the dawn of day Michael had given us the key to the whole situation. It was a case of concussion, slight enough to have been a simple matter but for Matty's treacherous tongue, and

the double lie with which she had concealed from us the fact of Michael's fall.

For several days he lay in the dark out of sight and sound of everything, and in three weeks he was himself again.

Elizabeth and I claimed our share of blame in the events of that day, but Phillida would have none of it. Even Matty's share was brushed aside.

"It was all Barry's fault," she declared; "he and he alone was to blame. Had he been at home it would never have happened."

A more senseless assertion I never heard, even from Esmé. With her hot-headed Irish nature, unjust and unreasonable statements were inevitable. But for the calm fair-minded Phillida to let fly a remark—only forgiveable from a jealous girl at loggerheads with her lover—I lost all patience with her.

"If you mean that but for his father's return, the boy would have had no chance, I can understand you," I hotly retorted. "He certainly owes his recovery to Barry."

"I didn't mean that; I meant what I said," Phillida answered with that calm self-sufficiency that I had come to find so irritating. Indeed, we nearly came to loggerheads, and but for the fact that, as a guest, I was more or less tongue-tied, my temper would have led me on to the thorny

path of plain speaking. I was badly reminded of Lady Fane. So much so that by contrast I found myself conceding to Esmé at least one Christian grace sadly lacking in Phillida. Esmé, with all her witchery, was human—certainly no Pharisee.

Meantime Barry himself, blissfully ignorant of the war of words into which I had been drawn in his defence, was at that moment playing spillikins with Michael, each utterly content in the company of the other.

Indeed, since his father's return the child had clearly no use for me, nor, if the truth be told, for his mother either.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LETTER AND A TELEGRAM.

BARRY being now at home and Michael out of danger, I had serious thoughts of descending upon Eve without any warning, even at the risk of a rebuff. Her second spell of silence had troubled me not a little. She might at least have given me news of the runaway couple, or at all events reported her lack of it.

I had been considering for two days what line to take up, as I was apt at all times to blunder badly in my dealings with Eve. Before I could come to any conclusion, the long-looked-for letter appeared. Though not weighted by so big a bombshell as its predecessor, it stirred me to a yet deeper indignation. First, she must start by congratulating me (of all people) on my engagement to Lady Dorinda. And as though that were not exasperating enough, she must add insult to injury by upbraiding me for keeping her in the dark. It was incredible that a woman

of her sense should take seriously any *on dit* in a paper like 'Society's Latest.' But there it was! One could never predict what Eve's imagination might lead her to believe if she were sufficiently prejudiced against anyone. Had it come to that? If so, our friendship was lost indeed, and it would have fared better with me had I buried my bones on the Russian frontier. Then this maddening woman, not content with marrying me off to Lady Dorinda, must needs warn me against getting my name coupled with Phillida's.

"The gossips much prefer a March hare about a family with a flair for the proprieties like the Fanes rather than the everyday entanglements that the smart set indulge in. Having made yourself interesting as a lost hero in Rubalmania, you can't be too careful. But, of course, if Barry's back, it's quite O.K."

To write like that! As though I were a mere youngster, and had not managed to steer my own way as a bachelor through Mayfair without having my name bandied about by the Society papers. And as if the 'S. L.' would want to annoy Edward or the Fanes!

Finally, she must needs go off at a tangent and attack me about Mrs Meadstone's 'March hare,' thus proving that she must be in close touch with

Dick and Ruth. I, who fondly imagined I had successfully laid that ghost to rest when I tackled the woman in Greenfields' drawing-room, to be now asked to stand and deliver! I, who had never so much as discussed the matter even with Barry; and was waiting (with some curiosity, it must be owned) to learn whether Phillida had yet thought fit to inform her husband of the blackmail visit she had received in his absence from Esmé's one-time maid. The fact that Eve was prejudiced against the Fanes accounted for her ridiculous reference to what she was pleased to call "this secret marriage between Philip Fane and Barry's first wife."

"Dick," her letter went on to say, "has known of it for some time. Indeed, that foolish Mrs Ben seems actually to have bribed the Meadstones to keep it dark. That is why Dick has now been obliged to take some action in the matter; though it was certainly very unwise of him to ask Lady Dorinda's advice. She seems to have drawn him on by speaking of her great friendship with you and Edward. Dick only met her the other day over a concert she is getting up for the G.A.Y.'s. Of course, such a matter as this should never have been discussed with anyone except his father; but he is still feeling very sore with both Barry and Phillida on Ruth's account as well as his own —and who can blame him? I suppose Phillida

will hardly like giving up Greenfields, but you can't expect me as Ruth's aunt not to be pleased with the prospect. It certainly modifies my opposition to her marriage with Dick. The whole thing will be a nine days' wonder, of course. We all knew Philip Fane's marriage was of his mother's making, and Mrs Philip was too stupid for anything, which no doubt accounts for Phillida being such a bore.

"And now about Dick's runaway marriage. Don't be too hard on him. He knows nothing about his mother's past, and that swank of his hides a sensitive spirit as well as an affectionate heart. Matty is another sort, a bully and a liar to boot. I prefer Dick. He is a bit of a moral coward, I grant you, but he is not to blame for this family skeleton which has been hidden from him all these years. It is not surprising that now he has found it out for himself he should bitterly blame his father for having kept him in the dark. Had Phillida only been decent about Ruth, this runaway marriage of theirs would never have been perpetrated, so she is properly punished. Don't ask me to pity her, that's all! You will explain it away, of course, by saying she is a throwback to Lady Fane, and that her grandmother would have done just the same in forbidding Ruth the house once 'she connected herself with the stage'—I believe that is the

term they used in those days. It is quite in the picture of the Fane family that Philip should have shrunk from shocking his Quaker connections by announcing his marriage to Esmé so soon after Grace's death, and thus made a hole-and-corner affair of it—so like those righteous Fanes! Philip I can forgive, under the circumstances; but there is no excuse for Phillida blackballing Ruth in the way she has done. In her grandfather's day they labelled people black or white—separated the sheep from the goats. But I've no patience with a girl living in the present day who can't move with the times and distinguish between modes and morals. Of course, your contention will be that there *is* a connection. But I am ready to prove that there is no blood relationship whatever between the two. You will be badly put out, I know, by reading a few lines I have just come upon in last week's 'S. L.' about the Dundarran mystery. This, I'm afraid, Dick is to blame for, though no doubt Mrs Meadstone was originally responsible. The sooner Dick realises that the less he encourages Society to inspect his mother's laundry, the pleasanter things will be for him. He, poor boy, is now doing far more harm than Mrs Meadstone could ever do to queer the pitch. If you would only talk to him you would be able to make him see sense.

"Ruth has taken an entirely different stand, and refuses to believe a single iota of Mrs Meadstone's story. The whole thing is in danger of creating a serious quarrel between the two, and they haven't been married more than a fortnight! I suppose you will be far too occupied with Lady Dorinda to take any further interest in your godchildren."

I read no more. Eve's attitude towards this blasted business was incredible.

She was a fool not to see through the whole thing, as well as through Dick's specious reasons for all he had done, or left undone. That this rotten Society rag should have coupled my name with Lady Dorinda's was certainly monstrous! There was no excuse for the rumour. We had met, most casually, during my time in Paris. I recalled one or two chaffing remarks at my expense—in very bad taste—from the Barkers and Earpens, but as their conversation bristles with that sort of thing, I had never given the matter a second thought. Edward, too, would be seriously annoyed.

I tramped through the woods in a villainous mood, damning all reporters and news-mongers in general, and the 'S. L.' in particular.

Coming in again, still in a towering temper, I wrote to Eve:—

"DEAR EVE,—If you have taken to crediting the lies of the 'S. L.' and the sort of blackmail inventions that Mrs Meadstone deals in, it is futile to carry on a correspondence with you. Ruth has a jolly sight more sense than her aunt or her husband.—Yours,

J. C.

P.S.—You are evidently very much in a hurry to marry me off. But you might have seized on someone a little less expensive to dress than Lady Dorinda! As you don't propose our meeting, I suppose you have not even her regard for an old friend. I believe the length of your friendship with me is a trifle longer than hers (by something like twenty years) if I'm not mistaken."

I was re-reading my letter and its postscript with a certain satisfaction as having got back a little of my own when Ben presented me with a telegram.

"Meet me eleven o'clock, station platform to-day, frightfully important, Ruth."

I glanced at the clock; it was a quarter to eleven! A truly characteristic summons from a modern chit of twenty to an uncle to whom she should have been grovelling, having just disgraced the connection by a hole-and-corner marriage at a registry office not a fortnight ago. Had the wire only been from her aunt!

"Any answer, sir?"

I found Ben, in his usual mute and majestic fashion, was still standing at my elbow.

My answer was to give him the contents of the telegram to read.

I was to learn later from his wife that Ben had secretly supported Ruth's cause from the first, and was in hot though silent rebellion against Phillida for forbidding her the house. As a result, without a word, and within five minutes, he had secured for me both chauffeur and car. Indeed, before the clock had struck eleven I found myself speeding along the Dulford road at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

CHAPTER XXVII.

UNDER CROSS FIRE.

I found Ruth at the station on the platform.

When I last saw her—three years ago—she had been little more than a child; a clumsy schoolgirl, with a rosy face and radiant smile. It was now a tall graceful creature that stepped towards me like a young gazelle; poise and purpose in the carriage of her head, and in the glance of her eye, a certain air of good breeding, too, that *je ne sais quoi* so characteristic of the Mainwarings—her aunt Eve in particular.

But Ruth's smile was still her own—likewise her manner of greeting. She fell on my neck as of old and made me a very pretty apology. An apology indeed that, combined with the embrace, bid fair to demolish the austerity of tone I intended to adopt towards this unconscionable young couple as well as the real defaulter herself. For it was Eve I was bent on calling to account for their crazy marriage, furious though

I had been with Phillida for voicing the same view.

"I had to get at you this way, Uncle Jim," she explained, "for Dick and Aunt Eve would not hear of my walking up to call on you at Greenfields. I rather fancied the notion myself, feeling it might bring things to a head."

"Did you?" I asked drily. "I should have thought you and Dick had brought quite enough upon your own heads without——"

"Yes, yes, I know that, you dear thing. You're naturally bent on bringing me to book. But let's take all that as said. Can't we? You're shocked and I'm penitent. And now we can get to business."

"I don't know what you call business," I retorted. "Phillida's seen fit, so I'm told, to forbid you Greenfields, and I intend to be equally straight with Dick by letting him know I've no further use for him as a godson, after the rotten way he's been carrying on. Of course, you, my dear child, are far too blinded by love to see any point but his."

"Oh, I see *your* point, Uncle Jim; it jumps to the eye. I only wish you could get a squint at Dick's, because he hasn't had an earthly——"

"An earthly *what?*" I asked in some irritation.

"Not an *earthly*," she repeated; "not a dog's chance!"

"A dog's chance!" I cried, really angry now. "How utterly absurd! Dick's been a spoilt boy from the start, that's what's wrong with him."

"Now don't go and get ratty, Uncle Jim. You can't judge of anything just now, seeing you've been off the stage these three years, without even a chance of an audience. So you haven't the foggiest notion what a hellish time Dick and I have been having. You blamed me, I know, before you went off to Rubalmania for bolting from Aunt Eve, but you've had no idea how unbearable she was to live with, and as for the time you were hung up in Russia, it was the limit! She was for ever fancying you'd be polished off, catching on to every conceivable horror, and looking unutterable things at me whenever I started to laugh or joke. Thank God, you're home now, so we can all go back to the jolly old game of listening to you two having a knock at each other. Though really, at the moment, you know, I'd advise you to give her a wide berth, just while she's so frightfully upset about that line in the 'S. L.' She's thirsting to knife Lady Dorinda for barging in, for, of course, she's responsible for that howler."

Here I broke in hastily. "Now, Ruth, you leave Aunt Eve and me to manage our own affairs. I'm here to listen to your and Dick's grievances."

Not for worlds would I own to this young thing what her last words had meant to me!

"But don't you see, Uncle J., *I'm* trying to be decent to Aunt Eve, for she's all along had some glimmering of Dick's difficulties, but you—you've never had the foggiest notion."

"Well, then, my dear girl, give me a chance. Fire away!" I cried gaily, feeling as though a mountain of misunderstanding had in that moment been magically removed from my mind. A thousand recollections came crowding across my brain. Could I only get away and read Eve's letter with this new light thrown upon it! Did Ruth catch the sudden note of relief in my voice? Not she! Her thoughts were naturally with this much maligned husband of hers.

I awoke from a reverie to hear her saying in my ear, "Let's sit down on this bench here; you look a bit fagged." She had linked her arm again in mine while she led me to one of those beastly backless benches that are to be found on a deserted wayside station.

"Well, then, I must first tell you—straight away—you never realised what it meant to Dick that awful time when he was so gone on Phillida."

"Gone on Phillida," I gasped. "Who put such a foolish idea as that into your head?"

"Why, Dick himself. Besides, anyone could

see it. *I* did, that day at Saucers—the very first day Dick and I met. He told me all about it afterwards. It must have been frightful to meet a topping-looking girl like Phillida, and have her as a pal for two years, to be full of hope, and then when his father came home to have him marrying her instead."

"But it was an absurd mistake on Dick's part. She was five—seven years older than he."

"But, you darling old thing, people don't trouble about that when they fall in love. Besides, Dick thought he had a chance. You see, she was engaged to his mother's cousin, Major Gordon, who was killed in the war, and *he* was the image of Dick. I know, because I've seen his photo. No wonder Dick felt bitter about it. And then to think of Barry marrying her merely for Greenfields."

"But, my dear girl, Phillida could have waited for Dick if she'd cared, and still kept Greenfields. I suppose he never thought of that. Imagined, no doubt, the conceited ass, that she was in love with him."

"No, he didn't; you're not fair to him there, Uncle Jim. What he couldn't stand was their marrying like that in a hurry. It was a rushed affair, you must own."

"Like yours," I interrupted.

"Not at all." She had her answer ready.

"We'd known each other for three solid years."

"Well," I said, a little nonplussed, "I suppose Dick failed to give his father credit for falling in love at first sight—men *have* been known to do it, you know."

"Well, you couldn't expect him to see the sentimental side of it; and then directly you'd gone to Rubalmania that Meadstone woman began hinting things to Dick soon after Michael was born, telling him that he (Dick) was really Phillida's half-brother and the true heir to Greenfields. So ever since twenty-one he's been waiting for his father to speak, and he hasn't. It's only natural he should feel Barry hasn't been very straight with him."

"Barry not straight with him," I said, exasperated beyond all bearing. "If he only really knew what he owes to Barry."

The moment the words were out I saw the mistake I had made. And Ruth brought it home by saying—

"That's just what I guessed. I told Dick I was sure there was something fishy about that Meadstone woman saying she could get his mother's marriage certificate, if Dick had a hundred pounds to spare, which he fortunately hadn't. Then I found from Ben that she was

dunning Elizabeth by threatening they'd split about Phillida's father. Finally, I got so fed up with it all that I told Dick I believed the woman was simply out to get what she could out of the lot of us; finally, that he could choose between me and this Greenfield stunt. So he chose me. But now this damned woman has turned up again, and Dick's again in a seething rage with Barry. So, you see, as soon as I could, I've come to you for the real facts.

"Oh, you have, have you?" I said drily, feeling like a man with a pistol at his head.

"Yes, you're Dick's godfather, so it's quite a Victorian thing to do to apply to you. You can't find fault with me for doing that now, can you?"

I had my back against the wall.

"Whilst Dick has a father"—I couldn't for the life of me say *his* father—"the duties of my sponsorship certainly don't include interfering between the two," was the only answer I could think of at the moment.

"But you'd never wish Dick to go to Barry believing all the beastly things he does about him. The fact is, you all—even Aunt Eve—take for granted we're still children and know nothing, and what's more oughtn't to know anything, and that's just the curse of it all."

"And now, my dear girl," I said, feeling there was nothing for it but to burn my boats, "here comes my point, which you, I will admit, have so far had no chance to even squint at—as you style it. I'm Dick's godfather, not only because Barry and I have been friends since Birchester days, but also because I was, once upon a time, a friend of his mother's too, and made her a promise some twenty-five years ago which I should now have to break if you and Dick are to be introduced to the family skeleton."

"Oh, that's it, is it. I might have guessed. It's so like you Victorians! You're always so taken up with being loyal to your own generation and your precious pre-war standards, you never think of us—modern young people, as you call us—who have got to cope with this post-war world. You call us rotten—at least you've just called Dick rotten,—but where would you have been, I ask you, if you had had to face the hectic things Dick has had to." (I thought grimly of my recent time in Russia!) "That's where Aunt Eve's so decent. She does understand the difference between the world when she was young and the one I'm trying to cope with. If Phillida is Dick's half-sister, hasn't he a right to know it, even if you did promise his mother a dozen times to keep silence about it? Is it fair that she should

hamper us who have got our own lives to live because she wanted to hide the truth? Why, hang it all, how would you like to have been on tenter-hooks for three years wondering who your father really was?"

I had a vision of the immaculate Edward, of my prim little mother, my patriarchal father with his portentous frown and his Presbyterian principles. Such a remark as Ruth's was enough to make them turn in their graves!

I laughed aloud.

"Dick would have found life in Carmichael Castle, to say nothing of its discipline, a beastly bore, I can tell you—uncommonly dull and dour compared to the jolly time he had with his mother on the Italian Riviera." I was making a bolt for freedom.

Ruth must have seen it, for she seized my arm, exclaiming, "Don't let's go on beating about the bush like this, Uncle Jim. I had better tell you at once that if I can't get the facts out of you I have made up my mind to walk up to Greenfields and ask Barry forthwith. I shall tell him that, as Dick's wife, I have a right to know the truth about his father."

By this time she had brought me to my knees all unwittingly. It had been comparatively easy to satisfy Phillida as to her father's honour that

day in Greenfields' drawing-room without dragging in Frank Gordon. But here with Ruth I was in danger of falling between two stools. Either I must let her run away with the idea that Philip was the skeleton in Esmé's cupboard, or else give her the whole story of Frank Gordon. Half-truths would make matters ten thousand times worse than the 'S. L.' could make them.

Then Ruth fired her last shot.

"Can't you see," she exclaimed, "you dear duffer, that I'm doing everything I can to prevent Dick getting his wind up and starting to slang Barry; for, ever since I first set eyes on him three years ago, I've felt he was a super sort of person, even if you hadn't always told me how topping he was."

The shot went home.

"Look here," I said, "let's have lunch at the inn, and then you shall have the story of Dick's mother as far as I know it."

"You are a dear," she cried, with shining eyes, "a priceless dear. You've saved me a grim time with Barry, and I'd never have got it out of him, I feel sure."

It was a doubtful compliment to me, though it showed her acumen.

It was not till we had been refreshed in the best bar-parlour of the Cockhorse Inn, not till

the sunny little room with its rose-papered walls and its portraits of the Royal family had imbued me with a sense of privacy, not till we were ensconced in two easy-chairs by a glowing fire and in possession of two cigarettes—not till then did I start my story.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

I BREAK FAITH WITH ESMÉ.

"We were four officers of the 90th on a shikari expedition when Esmé first came upon us. She had induced a scientific lady of uncertain years to invade our retreat, with stories of a rare red beetle that inhabited the Komankotal woods. To all but one of our party Esmé Dundarran was, indeed, a stranger—

> 'A sudden apparition sent
> To be a moment's ornament.'

It was only afterwards that we learnt the fact of her having left Lahore under a cloud. At the time Philip and I were as ignorant as Barry of the fact that it was to put the seas between her and Frank Gordon that her aunt had been persuaded by the Dundarrans to take her to India for six months. In those days to suppose that a lovely creature like Esmé would be returned upon the hands of her family was to suppose the im-

possible. It is a mystery to me even now how she and Frank succeeded in concealing from the family the fact that he had exchanged into the Indian battalion of the 90th. They had carefully arranged this further scheme which brought them to Komankotal that summer. Not even her aunt at Lahore guessed why Esmé had elected to spend the summer in the Himalayas with a female entomologist, whose only qualification for the part of chaperone was her age. As it happened, no previous experience would have been of the slightest use to that poor benighted soul, so far as Esmé was concerned.

When Frank broke the news of the arrival of a lady bug-hunter, we all groaned. Could anything be done to scare her off this—our sacred hunting ground? What was she like, and was she alone?

No! It was like his cursed luck (he told us). Not only had the old spin got a girl in tow, but she must needs turn out to be Irish, and a cousin of sorts, since her name was Dundarran. More than once that evening he swore he'd no use for women who came poking their noses in where they weren't wanted. Devil a bit of notice would they get from *him*.

In the days that followed—days in which Esmé straightway cast her spell upon that small community—neither she nor Frank allowed us

to guess the real state of affairs between them. Indeed, but for one fatal evening—a month later, —I should certainly never have had cause to suspect any collusion between the two.

Philip and I were the sportsmen of the party, and were left by the other two to spend our evenings together. Frank Gordon had joined us as an afterthought. He was studying Pushtu at the time; and his evenings, he told us, were dedicated to the Munsshi; those evenings that I knew afterwards were spent in the woods with Esmé! Barry, though my sworn friend of Birchester days, was then still but a 'griff' in the eyes of the regiment. As a young doctor, lately attached to the 90th, he was soon voted a hopeless recluse. Small, shy, and retiring, scientific research was his first and only love. His evenings at Komankotal were, like Gordon's, given to study.

Our first vision of Esmé, carrying a basket (the bug-hunter in the rear, magnifying glass in hand), produced quite a sensation. They became Beauty and the Beast from that day forward.

Philip and I were both badly smitten from the start. To Philip it soon ceased to be the pleasing plague of a passing flirtation. In three weeks' time he was a miserable man, fighting for his soul. To Esmé this philandering was merely fun. The fact that he was a married man troubled her

not at all. She had not stayed in India a month before she had adapted herself to a society she found very tolerant of the 'little affair' element. To have two men quarrelling over her added, no doubt, to her zest for the sport. In any case, she made a successful rift in our friendship. Philip for the first time looked coldly upon me, while I resented that he, a married man, should criticise me for trying my luck with this fascinating girl.

We had a foolish argument one night about nothing—a trifling dispute over the shikar the day's sport had yielded. Leaving him, morose and moody, I strolled out into the moonlit night to cool my temper.

Eleven o'clock saw me three miles along the Komankotal road. On turning my face homewards I noticed at a little distance on the hillside the figures of a man and woman, the man with his arm round the woman's waist.

It was too far off to identify them, but moved by curiosity, I stood still to watch them. Then it was that something in the perfect outline of the woman's form roused my suspicions.

Esmé and Philip were my first thought!

There had been time enough for Philip to gain the hill.

Was this an assignation?

I realised that he had been in the clutches of

passion that evening, and he had, I knew, drunk a stiff whisky-and-soda before flinging down his hand at picquet. I moved instinctively into the shadow of a bush, when a strange thing happened. A figure suddenly appeared along the road coming directly towards me—a figure that gradually emerged into Philip! I thought at first he must have seen me in the moonlight till I recalled the fact of my standing within the shadow of the bush, and realised that his eyes, like mine, must have been caught by the figures upon the bare hillside.

Both were to be seen now clear against the horizon in the full rays of an Indian moon. Like me, the sight of them had brought Philip to a standstill. Like me he remained spellbound.

And there we stood, not a hundred yards apart, both rooted to the ground as by the wave of a witch's wand, both watching the two figures entwine till they became as one.

Countless moments passed, there seemed a ghastly pause in the movement of life itself, before the man plunged down the hillside and was lost to view, while the woman started straight for the path to the high-road, the path at the end of which stood—Philip! Would he budge? I wondered. Not he! Never a muscle of his body moved. He might have been turned into a pillar of salt.

On reaching the high-road, Esmé (for it was now unmistakably Esmé) started back with a scream. It was not me she saw but Philip, for I was farther down the road still within the shadow of the brushwood.

'*Not* Philip?' she gasped.

Still he neither stirred nor spoke.

'*Not* Philip?' she cried out desperately, whether in terror or only simulating it, who shall say?

'Yes—Philip.'

He spoke at last, but his voice might have been that of an archangel, so stern and cold was it, so lacking all human emotion. (It is from him Phillida gets that adamantine manner when her self-control is tried.)

'Yes, Philip,' he repeated, still in tones of ice. 'But who'—he paused—'was that fellow over there, the fellow you've just parted from. Not Carmichael surely?' The sarcasm in his voice would have maddened any woman if it had not scared her.

'Why not?' she parried, merely marking time, no doubt, in her dilemma.

At that he took fire. 'You can answer me like that after all we have——'

I could stand there no longer unseen by either. With an unnecessary crackling of twigs beneath my feet, I strolled straight upon the two.

'Miss Dundarran,' was all I managed to say as I lifted my cap.

Philip was thunderstruck, and we stood there together, the three of us, speechless. Then he rounded upon Esmé. 'And you would have let me think the d——d fellow over there was Carmichael.' There was contempt as well as anger in his voice. 'Good God!' he cried. Without another word, without so much as raising his cap, he turned on his heel and left us together by the roadside.

There was a deathly silence.

Esmé broke it at last. 'I shall never forgive Philip. Remember that.' She flung out the words, her eyes flashing like blue stars in the moonlight.

There was again silence, and again Esmé broke it.

'Perhaps you're not above seeing me home, Captain Jim?' It was her own particular name for me, and I had always thrilled to the sound of it.

We started together down the road. Never before had Esmé appeared more appealing than on that night, as she moved at my side like some enchanting mermaid in the moonlight, speaking the while of herself in sad sweet tones as a friendless girl flung among strangers, tossed into 'this great godless world of Anglo-India.' (Thus could

she describe the kindliest confraternity to be found the world over.) Not one of all that crowd, she declared, had ever shown her kindness or consideration. They had merely amused themselves with her, despising her because she was poor and unprotected. I alone, she would have me suppose, had acted towards her with the feelings of a gentleman. But for me she had felt herself indeed a castaway.

Almost I believed her! Yet I walked at her side, tongue-tied and miserable as though caught in a net, the victim of some ghastly dream—all the more ghastly that, in company with Esmé, one had always a more or less mesmerised sense of sweetness and light.

As we neared the bug-hunter's bungalow she turned to me.

'May I have your word, Captain Jim—the word of a gentleman—never to speak of this night again to a living soul?'

'You may trust me,' I said, and left her.

It was past midnight.

The next day Philip was in the grip of fever, and by one of those strange ironies of life, there came a week later, as he lay there, a cable informing him of the death of his wife at Greenfields from pneumonia.

Barry and I nursed him till the fever left him. Then I went down-country with him,

seeing him off at Bombay by the first boat for England.

When I returned a fortnight later to finish my leave at Komankotal, I was greeted with the news of *Barry's* engagement to Esmé!"

"Oh, Uncle Jim," Ruth exclaimed when I reached this stage of my story, "how did she do it?"

"We shall none of us ever know," I said, "for in those days women were, to Barry, an unopened book. He had always been dubbed a misogynist in the regiment, and this engagement to Esmé was a nine days' wonder to everyone. The story went that no sooner had Philip and I started for the journey down-country than Esmé collapsed with a well-timed breakdown, and Barry was called in.

As a doctor he may have recognised the hysterical agitation of a terrified and disappointed woman. As a man, his knowledge of women was, as I have said, less than limited. The girl was beautiful, her story must have been plausible.

Barry himself never gave me a chance of discussing his engagement. He said, simply enough, that his people having known Miss Dundarran's family in Ireland, they met as old acquaintances. Nothing that could have been said, I feel sure,

would have deterred him, once the die was cast. What he thought of Philip and me as aspirants for Esme's hand I never learnt. Our part in the affair could scarcely have been a creditable one, according to Esmé. I never suspected anything till the day of the marriage at Komankotal, when Frank, who was to have given her away, failed to turn up at the hour appointed. The strange hysterical fright of the bride on that occasion came back to me in a flash when, seven months later, Dick came into the world.

There is little left to tell you, save that, five years after, when staying at Santa Margherita with Esmé and Barry, I discovered Frank again carrying on an intrigue with her. Barry himself was utterly blind, till one night, having sat up with a dying man till shortly before daybreak, he came upon them creeping back to the villa. Barry challenged Frank then and there, and those two Irishmen fought it out upon the sea-shore. It was the only argument a cur like Frank could understand, but only Barry would have sought to settle the matter out of hand. By good luck I discovered the two engaged in a deadly struggle, and had some ado to separate them. Heaven knows what might have happened had they not been disturbed, Barry being no match for a great athlete like Frank. Whether Esmé ever corresponded with the scoundrel after that will never

be known, but it is certain Frank never troubled them with his presence again.

"This," said I, "is the story of Dick's mother as I know it. I can safely leave it to you to tell him as much or as little of it as you choose. You know enough of his feelings as a son to pick your words."

By this time we had to make a bolt for Ruth's train—the 6.30 express to London. She gave me an expressive hug when I had found her a seat in the dining-car, and fluttered a glove from the window as the train moved.

I then walked slowly back to Greenfields with Eve's letter for company.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MILLS OF GOD.

On my return I found Barry pacing up and down the drive. He greeted me with, "You've been a deuce of a time with Ruth. I suppose Dick sent her to try and make his peace with you . . . or was it, by chance, to tackle you over this blasted Meadstone business? If you got half as well out of it as you did with Phillida, you were lucky. I only wish we'd had a chance of talking it over together first."

"Well, you see, old chap——" I began.

"Yes, yes, I know," he interrupted, frowns and fidgets to the fore. "I've always turned you down whenever you've been within arm's length of the subject, so I don't blame you. As it happens, Phillida and I have just had a bad half-hour together. She's told me all about that interview in the Greenfields' drawing-room. I don't know how to thank you, old chap, for

sparing her all suspicion of the truth. You kept your head better than I've done."

"Well, old man, it wasn't very difficult, after all, to clear her father without giving Frank away."

"But Frank—Frank Gordon does not come into this." Barry spoke irritably.

"What the dickens do you mean?" I replied with equal irritation. "That hag was out to prove a private marriage between Philip and Esmé. If you want to get this thing straight without letting Frank down, you have only to run her in for libel and say no more. I know you want to avoid hurting Phillida's feelings about Frank."

"But, my dear chap, what's Frank to do with Dick?"

Half-way down the drive we came to a standstill, and there in Barry's eyes I read the truth. "Good God," I said, "was it Philip after all?"

"If you didn't know *that*, how came Esmé to tell me you had promised her never to give away the name of Dick's father?"

"Oh, I gave my word right enough, old chap, but it seems I pitched on the wrong man."

"Ah!" said Barry, and paused. He was rapidly raking the past, I could see, with this fresh light thrown upon it. "That accounts for

your suspecting Frank from the first at Santa Margherita."

"But it's past belief," I objected. This thing of Philip stuck in my gorge. "You're sure Esmé did not choose to shield Frank at Philip's expense? Dick's a Dundarran, every inch of him."

"In looks, yes; but his overbearing manner—man, why it's Philip's own. That stiff-necked stubbornness too. He'll have his own way or die for it."

I groaned, seeing it all on a sudden. It explained so much. "But——" I began again.

"For God's sake," cried Barry, "let's keep to the present problem."

"Sorry, old chap," I apologised, "but surely it's plain sailing now that you've had to make a clean breast of it all to her."

"Clean breast!" he broke in; "how could I? Had I not promised Esmé, there is still Phillida to think of. Both her father and her lover involved in this damned business. So there was nothing one could do but stick to one's guns, and now the outcome of it all is she's leaving me."

"Good God," I said, "have you both gone mad?"

"My dear fellow, we were never saner in our lives! You see, our marriage was a common-sense affair to start with. I knew she had lost her lover in the war, though I had no idea Frank

was the fellow. It was Dick and Matty who brought us together in the first place. Then I found the boy was losing his heart to his half-sister. I had to choose between telling them both or saving the situation by proposing to Phillida. I chanced my arm with unexpected success. She and I, after all, have never had any illusions about each other. And anyway, I have taken my stand—that this matter of Dick's birth was entirely a thing between me and Esmé, and that I gave her my word."

"It's simple enough for you, my dear fellow, if you happen to care more for the dead than for the living."

"Damn you, Jim. There's no comparison, of course. Esmé was—well, you know what I went through, what she meant to me, while Phillida—well, there's Michael for one thing."

"That's plain enough," I thought, "the one link that binds the two of you." What I said was, "Look here, Barry, this thing's jolly simple now. This is where I come in. Not half an hour ago I broke my promise to Esmé. Ruth demanded the truth from me, and she got it, at least the truth as far as I knew it. She threatened to come to you for it, Dick being persuaded by this damned blackmailer that Phillida and you were out to keep Greenfields for Michael. You stand aside

now and let me tell the real facts to Phillida, or, if you prefer it, let Frank be the scapegoat. He was a beast, anyway. She can't keep her faith in both."

"She can and she shall," was Barry's answer. "In shielding Esmé and fathering Dick, I've brought all this upon her innocent head. The least I can do now is to set her free of me. You're a good chap, Jim, but it's no damned use your trying to butt in. Besides, you surely know Phillida by now. Unlike Esmé she's never out to make a scene. She has given me my congé, and with her that's final."

Having had some experience with Phillida myself, I could not but feel the truth of this. It was simply damnable.

"Don't look like that, my dear old chap; she has not proposed divorce. I've given her Michael, of course. I'm off to America. I've been asked to attend a big medical conference out there. It comes as a God-send."

"But what of Ruth?" I asked. "Not half an hour ago I let her know the story, incorrectly as it happens, but still——"

"My dear old chap," Barry broke in, "if you think that Phillida will ever bring herself to meet Ruth after the stand she has taken over Dick's marriage, you've misread her."

"But what of the papers?" I asked. "I suppose you know they have started a screamer about the Dundarrans' and the Greenfields' mystery."

"Damn the press!" was Barry's answer; "if there are fools who read these rags, let them get on with it. There are surely real difficulties enough in all conscience, without considering March hares."

As if to clinch his remark at this moment Michael appeared on the scene.

Rushing up to his father, his face on fire, he stammered out, "Daddy, Lisbet says she and me and Mummy are going t's'e seaside to-mollow, but *I* won't, 'cos I hates the sea. Ley can go if ley like, but you and me'll stay here togeller, won't we?"

Barry's face twitched, but all he said was, "Run away, son, I'm busy now with Two-twinks."

"But can't you give me now, Daddy, 'cos it'll be lunch-time in a single minute, and you and Two-twins can be busy togeller when I'm at my lunch?"

"All right, old man; just a minute and I will join you."

The boy turned towards the house. "Don't be long, Daddy," he shouted back.

"There you are," I said. "How can you and Phillida decide the way you have when there's a third party in it, and a party, too, with a mind of his own." As I spoke we saw Phillida appear at the front door, clearly in search of Michael.

CHAPTER XXX.

I BREAK FAITH WITH BARRY.

We watched Michael being sent indoors by his mother. No attempt at altercation with her, I observed. Then without hurry or hesitation, deliberate and direct as always, Phillida walked to us as we stood together, still half-way down the drive.

She addressed herself to me without pause or preamble. "Barry has no doubt told you that I have just given him a full account of that interview of ours with Mrs Meadstone. Michael's illness almost put it out of my head till I got a letter to-day to remind me."

Though I had often observed what a strangely softening effect emotion invariably made upon her chiselled features, I was amazed to see the change that recent anger had wrought in Phillida's whole appearance. It was a radiantly beautiful woman who now stood before us, a

triumphantly angry one too, neither crushed by her wrath nor ashamed of it.

"You, Colonel," she went on, "can always find noble reasons for everything that Barry does or does not do, but if you can justify or excuse his having married me without first telling me certain facts that Mrs Meadstone has now brought to light—facts which prove that his first wife must have been an utterly unprincipled woman—if he could not make up his mind to part with her when he found her out, he had no right to bring up her illegitimate children as his own, and then marry me without giving me a glimmering of the truth—let me care for them in the way I have, and bring my innocent Michael up along with them. He must have known I should not share his tolerance, or excuse the unfaithfulness which he saw fit to condone in this woman. I suppose she was so fascinating that he overlooked—all the rest. But, he might at least have told me the truth before I found myself tied to this—family of hers."

Gone was her usual slow, deliberate manner—the words came with torrential force, sweeping away all reserve. She stood there, the incarnation of righteous wrath. "Good God!" thought I, "this is no outcome of an hour's talk with Barry this morning. This is something that must have been seething in the girl's mind for many a long day.

As she paused a moment I saw her call to mind her own connection with the Dundarrans. Did she read the same thought mirrored in the two faces before her?

"I have not forgotten Major Gordon, of course," she added in an altogether different tone. "He was a Dundarran, I know, but his principles and those of his cousin's were poles asunder. His sense of honour, too—a contrast to Barry's. Before he would allow me to engage myself to him, he insisted on telling me—all there was to know of his past."

At that Barry and I both drew breath. Now, what had Frank told her? Nothing that gave Esmé away, that was clear.

"And you, Colonel," she went on, fixing me with her eye, "my father's old friend, I quite fail to understand your attitude towards this policy of deception Barry has persisted in all this time merely to screen this bad woman. You might at least have used your influence, seeing how great it has always been, to persuade him—to tell me the truth."

Barry had stood there so far entirely unmoved, it would seem, by all Phillida's fulminations. Gone were his usual frowns and fidgets. He might have been a mere onlooker, not to say an indifferent one, wholly unconcerned with the matter in hand.

Now, however, he broke in to say, "Look here, Phillida"—there was a certain quiet aloofness in his tone; his manner was almost fatherly,—"you leave Carmichael out of this. He was for telling the actual facts from the beginning, but I've always insisted that my word to Esmé stands, and, what's more, I've forbidden him to discuss the subject with you. And now, old chap"—he turned to me, a gleam in his eye,—was it humour, friendliness, or a tear that glistened there?—"we'll meet again at lunch, meantime I must keep my word to Michael." He dashed off, leaving us standing together in the drive. As he mentioned the boy he gave one quick glance in Phillida's direction. It was a glance calculated to quicken the pulses of a different type of woman, and scarcely explained his marriage as the common-sense affair to which he had just compared it.

By now I was in a rage. Flinging a freshly lighted cigarette into the bushes, I exploded with the words—

"I must speak if I die for it! You are evidently so taken up with your own grievances that you are quite unable to imagine what a man like your husband must have suffered when, as a boy of four-and-twenty, he was blindly led into a marriage with Esmé Dundarran. He saved your father from the mistake which, though seven

years older than Barry, he had been about to make, when Providence proved kinder to him than to Barry. That your father was a good man, I will grant, but he was never fit to hold a candle to Barry; while you don't seem to have discovered the type of man you have married, else you would have realised in some measure what it meant for him, then a mere boy, to find himself tied to a shallow faithless woman. What it must have meant to him to carry out his vow, for better for worse, till the end, saddled with children who, you have rightly guessed, were none of his. You think him weak—you talk of *my* influencing him—why, he took the whole tangle which that frail woman had made for herself—for her cousin, for your father, and for me, his friend—and straightened it out by himself, shouldering the whole burden. Your father only found her out at the eleventh hour. But for Barry, your childhood would have been a very different affair with such a stepmother. And here have you coldly condemned this man, your husband, without even waiting to give me, his friend, a chance of telling you how he had bound himself in honour, when Dick came seven months after his marriage to Esmé, never so much as to ask the name of the boy's father, much less reveal it to anyone. How could *he* tell you what he had never inquired into himself? Only once

have we two ever even distantly alluded to this affair—it was just after your marriage. And when I did venture to broach the subject to him again the other day in Paris, as a friend of forty years' standing, he rebuffed me. And here have you, with no knowledge of the real facts, elected to cut yourself adrift from your husband. That's your own affair, of course, but you've now added insult to injury by criticising to me this—my friend—a man miles above you and me. May God forgive you, Phillida, for *I* can't." I paused for breath, then muttering, "Tell him I—I'd forgotten an engagement in town to-night," I strode off blindly down the drive, this time without any inclination to revive old memories.

The discovery of Philip's part in this past and present tragedy had for the moment blotted out all the happy associations with the beech avenue. The snow had gone, the trees were bare, and all I saw along the well-known way that morning was the sere and withered leaf.

To me it was symbolic.

PART III.

"The Possible stands by us, ever fresh,
Fairer than aught which any life hath owned,
And makes divine amends."

—JEAN INGELOW.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RUTH TO THE RESCUE.

I had time to shake off the dust of Greenfields before I reached Dulford Station, but it was only to find that there was no London train for another two hours.

Loth to kick my heels about the platform for that length of time on a cold November afternoon, I cursed my luck. I could, of course, have filled in two hours very snugly in the best bar-parlour of the 'Cockhorse'—by the fire Ruth and I had so recently left. But that would arouse the suspicions of Mrs Banbury, the goodwife of the inn. She had already been somewhat intrigued, I could see, by my early lunch there with Ruth, not three miles from Greenfields. Hence was I led to charter a car and make for L. Junction some twelve miles off, thereby catching the King's Cross express and reaching the Club soon after three. As luck would have it, it was Saturday, and a popular week-end out of town, it would

seem, for the place was deserted. Being in no mood for the social amenities of clubland and the many questions I had yet to face over my Russian experiences, I hailed the empty chairs as my best friends.

After a solitary dinner, I repaired to the deserted smoking-room, there to pen an epitaph to a friendship of forty years' standing severed in the one stroke by a heartless girl, or, if you will, by my own outburst of ill-timed anger. Then, wearied out in mind and body, I sat nursing the blackness of my mood by a luxurious fire, haunted by thoughts of Barry—Barry of Ours—as he had been dubbed by the regiment. A true Celt, small and insignificant as he was, with his quaint sallies and his queer silences, his bubbling laughter and his simple austerity. At one moment ready to play his part as the butt of the regiment, at another rising to Savonarolian wrath where our morals were concerned, or riding rough-shod over everyone when a patient's life was at stake. In the odd way in which mere trifles will seize upon the memory in the black moments of life, there flashed into my mind a saying of my old Scotch Nanny. Barry, as a mere boy, was spending a lonely holiday with me at Carmichael. "I've aye found there's but twa sorts o' laddies the Almighty has seen fit

to fashion—the bairnly sort ye've to guard from the mischief that's in them ; and the ither sort, the rare yins—sons of a king, ye'd judge them—for it's on your knees ye'd like tae be—serving them. . . . Yon wee friend o' yours, Maister Jim, is a bit of baith."

And because he was a bit of both we all loved him, bullied him, and secretly envied him his gaiety of soul and singleness of heart. But to the end he remained an enigma to everyone, though not the youngest subaltern ever judged him by the commonplace code of the ordinary male. None ever supposed he had been caught by Esmé's beauty or Phillida's fortune. All recognised there was a snag somewhere, though none suspected Dick's parentage. Barry saw to that. Having entered the lists in Esmé's defence he had chosen the time-honoured weapon of marriage. And with Phillida he had made the same venture, when to save her from incest he had but to let her learn certain facts about her father if not her lover.

And these two women for whom he had staked everything, the one with her mysterious magnetism, her moral obliquity, the other so fatuously purblind, so lacking in imagination—had he won the love of either? I asked myself. Esmé's hysterical outbursts left one in little doubt of that

fact, but with Philip's daughter, Quaker silence and a proud spirit had built a granite wall there was no breaking down.

And as things had fallen out, I should never know more than I did now. With Phillida, as with her father, there would be no relenting. Never again should I see Michael or Greenfields; never learn whether his wife, before they parted, had made known to Barry my outburst of ill-timed anger.

I had reached thus far in my gloomy forebodings, when the waiter appeared at the door.

"A lady—Mrs O'Neill—asking to see you, sir, on important business."

The idea of a woman calling at the Club—and on me, of all people—at this hour, was in itself incredible; but to have a name announced that conjured up Phillida and Phillida alone!

My brain reeled!

When I repaired to the stranger's room and found Ruth, consternation was replaced by bewilderment. How in heaven's name came she to know I was sitting in my Club?

She soon enlightened me.

"Thank God I've run you to ground," she exclaimed, flinging herself into the largest armchair she could find. Fortunately we had the room to ourselves. "You'll never believe what a beastly time I had on getting back to Aunt

Eve. She has been in a complete state of dither ever since I was fool enough to tell her of the hour you and I spent on that draughty platform at Dulford. How should *I* know about this blessed fever you've had in Paris? I ask you.

"And when, to buck her up, I described the twelve o'clock lunch and roaring fire we struck at the 'Cockhorse,' she became quite hectic. *Were* you wearing an overcoat when you went out again to see me off? As bad luck would have it I remembered you *weren't*, and that made matters much worse. Then Dick came in all agog for news. I turned him down pretty fiercely, for I was completely fed up with Aunt Eve. By this time she was almost a physical wreck at the idea of your being stranded like that. I did all I could by reminding her that anyway in Russia you couldn't have had a nurse handy, but she had her answer pat—she always has—'the climate was different.' The end of it was, I phoned up on my own to Greenfields, to quieten her down for the night. After an abortive time on the telephone and much cursing, I got on, only to find you had fled to town! Hearing this, she went off the deep end again, forgetting altogether to be thankful you weren't in the clutches of fever. It was now the clutches of Lady D. she feared! So poor me, harassed beyond words by the two of them, made a bee-line for your Club. I'd a

shrewd suspicion you had dug yourself in here, and you see I was right!" With that she began vaguely to search her pockets.

"What about a cigarette, Uncle J., since I am here?"

"Isn't it a bit late?" I said lamely, as I handed her one, nervously expecting imminent interruption.

"Oh, no," she said with perfect *sangfroid*, "the night's yet young, but what's wrong with you? You look most frightfully done up and full of gloom. Nothing wrong at Greenfields?"

"Everything's wrong," I said. "Couldn't be worse! I've pretty well reached the end of my tether. It's good-bye to Greenfields and Barry into the bargain, probably Aunt Eve as well."

"Ye gods, this is interesting! You can't have fallen foul of Phillida or got yourself tied up with Lady D. by any chance? Do be a sport and tell me what it's all about?"

"Well," I said, lighting up at last, a strange sense of relief stealing over me, "it will be in everyone's mouth before very long, so I may as well tell you. All's up between Phillida and Barry."

"All's up? What on earth for?"

"Oh, this wretched Dundarran business the papers have got wind of. Phillida has given him his congé, *voilà tout!*"

"Well, I know she's been on edge for a long while. The last time I saw her, nearly a year ago, I felt really sorry for her. You know I don't feel angry with her the same way as Aunt Eve and Dick do, though she has turned me down. I can't help seeing she must have had rather a thin time of it, Barry being what he is, very much the gentleman, the 'grandsire-cum-grandison' touch. Fetching, I must admit, but maddening if you're in love with a man."

"Nothing so absurd as that, child, and you forget that only this morning you decided she had been rather keen on Dick."

"Oh, you didn't get me at all, Uncle Jim; anyone could see she never cared two hoots for him. Why, I saw that for myself the very first day you introduced us at Saucers."

And that child was even then taking notice!

"Anyway, Ruth, you are entirely on the wrong tack. Barry and Phillida married—I've had it from his own lips this very day—from entirely common-sense motives. Dick was so far right in thinking there was no romance about their marriage."

"Well, there I don't agree, and Dick's no criterion in this case. For one thing, men are such babes in these matters; for another, he only saw his father as a poor old dug-out, so he couldn't imagine a girl falling for *him*. Of course,

at first, I took the same view, thought it was the dead cousin she was still keen on, or even you, until I saw Barry."

Here I sat up and began to take notice.

"Is he as attractive as all that?" I asked with some eagerness. "Barry's the finest chap going, but I never thought of him as a lady's man."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, Uncle Jim. I can tell you this, that if he'd ever glanced my way it would have been all up with Dick."

This was, indeed, a new view of Barry!

In the regiment both his marriages had always been rather mysterious, since Barry as a lover seemed to most of us a hopeless anachronism. I was thoroughly intrigued by now.

"And where, may I ask, do you, as a girl, consider his great attraction lies?"

"Oh, there are his eyes, for one thing, his smile for another, and that delightful absorbed way he has of doing everything, as if he didn't care a hoot what people think—and he doesn't, you bet. As for his feelings for Phillida, you may take it from me—there's nothing in it. But with *her*, it's a very different matter. Indeed, I've always thought that in her heart of hearts she must be rather jealous of that lovely Esmé he so adored. Dick took me to see it—Kellerman's portrait of her—while it was still at Christie's,

and it's simply ripping; no wonder you were all in love with her. Then, in the Corner Street days, I couldn't help watching Phillida when Aunt Eve and I went to supper there sometimes; it used to fascinate me whenever I saw her and Barry together. They were like two lovers that had not yet found each other. And all this time Barry's been abroad, looking for you, I've been wondering how it's all panned out."

"Well, my dear child, whatever your thoughts were then or since, things have turned out quite otherwise. Phillida has deliberately chosen to smash up their marriage. Barry is off to America. He knows, once she has made up her mind, there's no changing it. He has equally taken his stand. He will have it that his word to Esmé binds him to silence. You were right in thinking you would get no change out of him. Wild horses won't drag anything from him now. All I can do, as things are, is to ask you to respect my own confidence of this morning. I was doubly wrong—you must just tell Dick."

As I helped myself to a fresh cigar, Ruth leaned forward and laid a hand on my arm.

"Don't you worry, old thing," she said. "I haven't had a word with Dick so far. The fact is that it came to me as I went back to town in the train this morning, that I'd rather leave him with his boyish dream of his mother. What

good would it do to spoil it? *I* believe that's been Barry's idea all along."

"It has—that, and sparing Phillida a sword-thrust—a two-edged one, as it happens."

"And she's no idea, of course?"

"None."

"Good! Couldn't anyone put her wise?"

"Now, Ruth, don't you run away with that idea. I've burnt my boats, butting in. If you meddle now——"

"No fear. My dear man, you forget I can't get within arm's length of either. Phillida's cut me, and Dick's cut Barry. Thank the Lord, the Atlantic will soon divide them. No! Apart from the fact that Dick and I are taboo, Phillida's as proud as Lucifer. Even Aunt Eve would hardly dare, and for some reason she's got her knife into Phillida."

"It's no good," I interrupted hastily in some irritation. Eve was dangerous ground. "No one can save this wreck Phillida's made."

"Why, you poor hoot! It's not a *wreck*—I believe it's simply that they've never got launched, not into the deep, as it were. Now's their chance, can't you see?"

"No, I can't. Things look hopeless to me, and I can only ask you, child, not to make the tragedy worse by blabbing about it."

"Trust me, Uncle Jim. I know you think we

post-war people are a poor lot, but we can keep our end up—'to bat and belt on' is the great idea with us."

"Good. I'll take your word. And now you must be off, otherwise I shall be called to order." Here I paused abruptly with, "But, good God, what signifies anything now? I've lost Barry, and the memory of another good friend, too, this day, and I've lost my bearings besides. I can see no light ahead."

"Can't you?" The girl caught her breath as she spoke, and paused before adding, "There's a bit of a fog, certainly; but *I'm* taking my bearings, and there's daylight ahead. One knows that."

"Maybe, perhaps, but the night's as black as it can be."

"And if it is! We can wait together like pals, in the dark, can't we, till it clears?"

And looking at the girl as she stood there, the light of hope and courage in her hazel eyes, I saw her as a young mariner who had lately launched her own boat upon stormy seas.

I saw her, too, as one who could be counted on to read her compass aright and steer a straight course; yet further, as one capable of helping other barks cast upon uncharted seas, to find their bearings.

EPILOGUE.

Two months have passed since, in the gloom of a November evening, I penned my prologue—two months fraught with incident to Ruth and Dick, to Eve and myself. For in that time we have successfully run to ground Mrs Meadstone and her blackmail activities. And in that time, Eve . . .

But with her name it is needful I call a halt. Our own romance has no place here. For this is Barry's show, and the curtain closed down upon his self-imposed banishment to America just five years after his hasty marriage on Armistice Day.

In those five years we have seen his course beset by the fog of doubt, the frost of pride, and finally by the wall of Phillida's will. Like the wave of Euroclydon, it has now made shipwreck of his biggest adventure.

Or, so it would seem, inasmuch as no news is forthcoming from Greenfields, nor yet from across the Atlantic. Barry himself is as silent as the

grave. Not a word, sign, or token, indeed, have either vouchsafed to me since that final flare up in the beechwood avenue.

Yet, even so, Ruth will have it that romance is waiting for those two round the corner—that Barry is bound to come by his own. "Bound to!" she asseverates. "For you bet it's the real thing this time with both of them. And may have been all along, for aught we know, only at first it missed fire!" More she will not say, unless it be to hint mysteriously that Barry is even now on the high seas.

So together we stand, she and I, *arrectis auribus*, as watchmen of the night, waiting for the dawn of Barry's return.

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